FOCUS ON THE FAMILY PRESENTS

Adventures in ODYSSEY

YOUNG WHIT™ & the Thieves of Barrymore

Dave Arnold & Phil Lollar

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Young Whit and the Thieves of Barrymore

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For Janna

My faithful companion

My wisest confidante

My dearest friend

Dave

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Chapter One

OCTOBER 29, 1935

A serpentine wire crossed the dark room. At one end of the wire, behind a file cabinet, a man hunched over a small metal box. Another man stood beside him, barking out orders.

"Aren't you done yet?" he scolded in a whisper.

"You wanna do it yourself, Ray, have at it. Otherwise, go check the connection."

Ray thought hard about cuffing Harry, a Dickensian-looking character slight of build, but wiry and reminiscent of a clown who'd forgotten to apply his makeup. Ray fancied himself the brain and Harry the brawn. Harry wasn't fond of that assessment. He may not be as notable as Ray, but he wasn't a slouch either.

Ray growled at Harry and shoved him aside. "You check the connection."

Harry complied. Following the wire's path, he bent down periodically to ensure it hadn't passed over anything damp or sharp. Twenty feet later, it lifted off the ground and terminated at a towering steel door.

Harry stopped, stuck his hand in his pocket, and pulled

out a pack of cigarettes. He tapped the box on the side of his hand until one jutted out. He pulled it out and placed the end between his lips, tucked the pack in his trouser pocket, and took a wooden match from his shirt pocket. Using his fingernail, he ignited the match and, holding it to the cigarette, inhaled until the tobacco glowed crimson. Then he held the match front of him.

On a metal door that must have been a foot thick, he saw a painted image of a house on a riverbank adorned with scrolls around its perimeter. The details framed the words *Mosler Safe* & *Lock*. A round cylinder as big as a saucer with numbers etched around its circumference was partly covered by the five sticks of dynamite he had taped beside it. Inserted into one of the sticks was the other end of the wire. Harry checked to make sure it hadn't pulled loose. It was secure.

A hat slapping across his ear startled him.

"You wanna get caught? Put out that light, you muttonhead!"

Harry blew the match out, flicked it in Ray's face, and shoved him backward.

Ray tumbled over the low railing surrounding the safe. "I ain't takin' none of that from you! I ain't stupid!"

Ray stood up, bent his face close enough to Harry that their noses almost touched, and muttered through gritted teeth, "Yer stupider than toast." He grabbed Harry by the collar and shook him so hard the cigarette fell from his mouth. "If it weren't for her, I'd—"

"Shut it!" Harry said. "Someone's comin'!"

Ray spun around to see a flashlight shining through the front window.

"You brought the cops down on us, ya idget," Ray scolded.

Both men ran back to the metal box. They had just huddled down over it when the door opened.

"Who's in here?" a commanding voice bellowed. The click of heavy footsteps followed behind the beacon of the bobbing flashlight as it entered the building.

"A copper. Nuthin' for it now," Ray whispered bitterly. "We need to get outta here before—"

A shower of sparks bursting off the floor next to the safe interrupted him. The sparks hissed and spit, speeding along the wire, upward toward the dynamite.

"My ciga-reet musta lit it," Harry spat. "Get down!"

They fell to the floor just before a massive explosion rocked the building, sending the constable flying backward. He hit hard against a table and fell limply to the floor.

The dust of the explosion clouded the room making it difficult to see. "Grab as much as you can and head for the door!" Ray coughed.

The two men ran toward the safe. Harry stopped to discover whether the police officer was conscious. He was not. Nor was he alive.

The vault door hung open. By the time Harry reached it, Ray had already stuffed most of the cash into the bags they brought for the job. "Hurry! Folks'll be swarming in here like locusts before long."

One minute later they ran outside carrying the remaining hopes and dreams of the people who had managed to not lose everything when the Depression hit six years ago to the day.

Now a new depression would claim their dreams.

"I think we clipped a copper," Harry said, rather indifferently. He was talking over a pay phone at a filling station an hour's drive away. The voice on the other end groaned.

"Well, how much did ya get?"

"Not much," he answered. "The safe weren't very full."

"If that copper's dead, they'll be after ya. Best to split up and let things cool off for a while."

"I dunno," Harry said. "I was thinking we oughta hit another place tomorrow. They'd never expect it."

After an awkward silence, the voice on the phone resumed. "We been testin' our luck too long. I got myself a feeling and when that happens, I listen. That means you should listen too."

"If you say so," Harry mumbled.

“Where you at?”

Harry looked around. “Some sleepy town. Don’t know the name of it.”

“Ray should steal a car and head for Chicago. You hunker down for a spell, try and blend in. We’ll meet up in Toledo after Christmas.”

“What about you? Where you headed?” Harry asked.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m right where I need to be. I’ve got something brewing.”

“I’ll case a few banks along the way,” Harry said. “We’ll need a lot more money than we took from that last one.”

“Fine, but keep yer head down.”

The phone clicked dead and Harry hung up the receiver. “I always do,” he snarled. He walked over to the black Chevy sedan he stole a few months back and got in. “Thinks you oughta get a different car and head to Chicaga fer a while,” he told Ray.

“That’s nice,” Ray responded, eyes closed. “But I’m more interested in Ohio.”

Harry scowled as he started the engine. The car backfired twice. He considered how it sounded just like his gun did when he popped that copper back in Arkansas. He put the car in gear and sped away down the dirt road, a plume of haze floating in its wake.

Chapter Two

A moonlit shadow floated along the side of the weathered old shed behind the house where young John Avery Whittaker lived. As the figure moved, it grew taller and taller and seemed to hunch forward as if about to pounce.

Unaware of what was taking place outside, Johnny sat at the desk in his room working on a replica of a storm glass weather barometer fashioned in the style of the one made by Admiral Robert FitzRoy, the taciturn sailor who had commanded the HMS *Beagle* for the Darwin expedition. FitzRoy was a brilliant meteorologist, and Johnny decided that since he'd been experimenting with lightning, it would be prudent to learn at least the basics about the weather.

Johnny dissolved correct measurements of potassium nitrate and ammonium chloride in distilled water. In a separate container, he mixed camphor and ethanol.

At the moment, he felt caught up in a lot more than just weather. Life in Provenance had proven to be more challenging than any other time he could remember, with the lone exception of when Grandfather Jackson and his mother, Janneth, died. There were many days when he longed for the fields of Kinglassie, the little village where his family had lived in Scotland. Everything about that place seemed magical

to him, and he deeply wished he could wander around the old haunts and lie in the grass at his favorite spot in the stand of trees where he used to read books and plan out his life. The world had seemed big and open and full of adventure and possibilities there. But now, in Provenance, he wondered if he would ever get clear of the trials and sorrows of life. It had been two days since the horse riding accident where his stepmother, Fiona, lost her sight. But those two days felt like months.

As he stared vacantly out the window, a single knock tapped on his door. Before he could answer, the door opened and Harold, his father, entered, closing the door behind him.

"Have you thought any more about where you might have misplaced the cloth?" he asked pointedly. Harold had taken a leave of absence from his duties at Duke University to take care of Fiona. Johnny wished he would just go back to work.

"I didn't misplace it. I know I put it in the shed."

"Well it's not there now."

"Maybe someone took it," Johnny suggested.

"Oh, come on, John. Who would break into a shed to steal a piece of cloth? Unless they knew about it. No one else *does*, right?"

"I haven't told a soul but you." Yet in the back of his mind Johnny had a gnawing feeling that he *did* know who took it: Professor Karl Mangle, father of his friends Steve and Paul.

At the site of the moonshine still nine days ago, everyone had gaped in awe when Johnny's friend Ben Huck awoke unharmed—even though they all believed he had been shot. At the time, Clarence Huck, Ben's father, proclaimed the event "a miracle." As Johnny lifted the healing cloth off of Ben, he vividly recalled Mangle looking straight at him and agreeing. There was something in Mangle's eyes that made Johnny uneasy then—and now. Had Mangle seen Johnny squirrel the cloth away in the shed? Maybe. He might also have made the connection between the cloth and Grandpa Jackson's journal. If he *had*, then it was more than likely that he had taken the cloth. He certainly had motive. A cloth with the power to heal could cure his son Steve.

Harold huffed as he paced about the room. “I can’t believe you’d be so careless with such a *valuable* artifact! Especially now, when your stepmother . . .” He stopped, shook his head, and sighed deeply. “You’re *sure* you didn’t leave it somewhere else?”

“Yes, sir,” Johnny said.

A grimace formed on Harold’s face. “I’m sorry, John. It’s not your fault. I’m just . . . frustrated.” Then, as quickly as he came, he opened the door and exited the room. Before closing the door he added, “You’d best get to bed.”

That shut door felt like another wall had been erected between Johnny and his father. A deep, aching sorrow clouded Johnny’s mind and he found it difficult to think, let alone concentrate.

Nevertheless, before climbing into bed Johnny gathered his senses and finished the project. He slowly poured the nitrate and ammonium solution into the ethanol and camphor solution. He then poured the mixed solution into a quart-size Mason jar and screwed the lid on, sealing it tight. It warmed to his touch.

He picked up the jar and walked over to his windowsill. Bending forward to set the experiment on the sill, Johnny jumped—nearly dropping the jar— when he saw a face pressed against the pane. McDuff saw it too and yapped angrily at the interloper.

“Quiet, McDuff!”

The pup stopped yapping, sat down on his haunches, and gave a low growl.

Straightening up, Johnny looked through the window again. An upturned nose fogged a small circle of the pane. Two hands cupped a pair of brown eyes like parentheses.

“Open the window!” a muffled voice whispered loudly.

It was Emmy.

Johnny sighed, set the storm barometer on the floor, and slid the sash open. “What are you doing here, Emmy? And how did you get on the roof?”

“I climbed up the trellis the same way I’ve seen you climb down. I’ve been worried about you. I haven’t seen you since

school let out for Thanksgiving."

"Thanks," Johnny replied dully. "Come on in."

Emmy demurred. "No, I shouldn't. It's not decent."

Johnny had no idea what that meant but didn't press the matter. "How's Ben doing?"

"Fine. He's back at school from his vacation. He took his dad to visit his mom in Mississippi, you know."

"Yeah. So no side effects from what happened at the still?"

Emmy shook her head. "Not that I can tell. I didn't talk to him, but he looked happy."

"Last time I saw him was at school before the break," Johnny said. "He asked how we knew about the still, and I told him we saw him walking into the woods behind the Granville place during my experiment."

Emmy turned thoughtful. "That was such a strange day. . . . I still can't figure out what happened."

Johnny nodded. He knew what had happened, but he couldn't tell Emmy. And though that whole adventure felt so big and surreal at the time, after Fiona's accident he'd forgotten all about it. Curious how things that seemed important—crucial, in fact—became trivialities when stacked up against the next trial. You could lose an arm and it would feel like your world collapsed. But then someone you love goes blind . . .

Until that event, Johnny hadn't realized that he had actually come to care deeply for Fiona. In spite of all his efforts to place her in a different category than his late mother, over time she had slipped beyond those boundaries. Her consistent love, the time they spent together, her wisdom and advice all propelled her into a place in his heart he thought would remain vacant the rest of his life. Somehow, Fiona had become his mother.

But the relationship would change now. For one, they would never ride horses together again. That had been their special time. But she couldn't ride now if she wanted to, and after losing her sight from riding she likely *wouldn't* want to.

An uncomfortable pause hung in the air. Finally, Emmy said, "I'm so sorry about Fiona. How is she?"

Johnny sighed heavily. “She didn’t believe it at first, even when Doc Willis finally told her that she was . . .”

“Blind?” Emmy offered.

“Yeah. . . . She said he was wrong. That she’d be back to normal soon enough. Doc said he’d come check on her in a couple of days, but Dad decided not to wait. He took her to a hospital in Raleigh yesterday. They did tests. We’re supposed to get the results on Friday, but the doctors there told her the same thing Doc Willis did. The swelling may go down by itself and her sight might come back, but it doesn’t sound good. She’ll likely be blind for the rest of her life.”

“I’m so sorry,” Emmy said softly. “How is she taking it?”

“How do you think? She’s frustrated. And angry.”

“Really? That doesn’t sound like her at all!”

Johnny frowned. “She can’t see, Emmy. She’s *not* like herself anymore.” His gaze moved beyond Emmy through the window to a huge autumn moon rising over the horizon. It reminded him of a giant basketball slowly bouncing off the hill up into the atmosphere. “ I badgered her all the time to go riding. Now I wish I’d never seen a horse.”

Emmy’s eyebrows scrunched. “But didn’t you make good memories riding together?”

“Yeah, but now they’re ruined. Every time we rode took us closer and closer to the moment she got hurt. Now, the good memories are just small pieces of the huge, bad one.”

“I doubt she feels that way.”

“I know. But . . . Emmy, she cries. All the time. I can’t stand it. I don’t know what to do!”

“I’d give her a hug. And pray for her.”

Johnny wanted to say so many things but clenched his teeth to hold back the words. He couldn’t say what he was feeling without the emotions spewing all over her. She meant well, but she had no idea how what she said came across. What he heard her saying was, “You’re being silly, Johnny. You shouldn’t feel that way. Prayer will fix it.” But he had tried praying. They all had. And after every prayer had been prayed and every hug had been given and every doctor had finished his tests, Fiona was *still blind*.

Why would God—if there even was a God—let such a terrible thing happen? For that matter, why did God let *anything* bad happen? The death of a mother. The move to a different country. His friend Steve stuck in a wheelchair. Growing up, Johnny had heard so much about how God loves everyone, but if that was true He sure had a strange way of showing it.

"I'm making things worse," Emmy sighed. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to help."

Johnny wondered if Emmy had read his thoughts. A scary notion. "No, I'm just being . . . me. Thanks for coming by, Emmy. I really do appreciate it."

She smiled feebly. "Mom wanted me to tell you that if there's any way we can help, just let us know. I mean, she'd flip if she knew I climbed up here to tell you right now. But I saw your light on, so—"

"Tell your folks thanks," Johnny interrupted. "But to be honest, we're all a bit . . . on edge right now. We just need to be left to ourselves for a while."

"I understand." She hesitated, looking as if she wanted to say something else. Finally she asked, "Are you coming to school tomorrow? Now that Thanksgiving break's over, we're doing Christmas stuff. It's been pretty fun. You could probably use some of that right now."

Johnny's instinct was to say no, but getting out of the house might be helpful.

"Maybe."

"I'll wait for you, just in case."

"Okay."

She reached through the window and grabbed his hand. The tears welling up in her eyes betrayed the smile on her face. "Bye then," she said. She traversed the roof, climbed down the trellis, and disappeared into the night.

Johnny's gaze turned back up toward the full moon. He wondered whether they'd ever build rockets that could fly into space—or even to the moon. If so, he'd like to be on that rocket. He wished he could fly there right now.

Stepping back to close the window, his foot landed on

something unexpected. A piercing *yipe* echoed in the room. “McDuff, get out of the way!” Johnny scolded. The dog lowered his head and skulked to a distant corner of the room where he lay down, sad eyes averting contact.

Johnny sighed again and crossed the room to the pup. “Sorry, boy.” He patted McDuff’s head and the dog licked his hand.

Outside, in view of Johnny’s room, the moonlight on the shed cast a veil over a lone figure who stood still . . . watching. Once Johnny pulled the shade and turned off the light, the figure walked stealthily around to the shed door, opened it, and sneaked inside.

Chapter Three

Johnny ate breakfast quickly. Although Harold was taking time off, he didn't fault Johnny for wanting to go to school. Fiona was ensconced in her own world and said nothing about it except "Have a good day," as Johnny grabbed his knapsack and hurried out the door.

The morning air felt brisk, and the wind whipped about just enough to encourage the last few dead leaves on the snow-covered oak trees to either wave good-bye from their branches or fall fatally to the earth. Walking down Magnolia Lane toward school, Johnny lost himself in the sound of the ice crystals crunching under his feet. The last vestiges of fall were replaced by the winter snow, as if an artist had wiped his canvas clean and painted his latest inspiration.

From behind him, Emmy called out, "Wait up!"

Johnny turned to see her prance down her porch steps and jog up beside him. "Chilly this morning," she said. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"Just lost in my thoughts, I guess. Listen, Emmy, I'm sorry about last night. It was good of you to stop by. And to offer to help."

She smiled. "I'm glad you decided to come to school. It hasn't been the same without you." She rolled her eyes.

“Wilson Knox has been pestering me.”

“Isn’t that all he ever does? Pester?”

Emily chortled. “He hasn’t been *mean* or anything. More like a fly that keeps buzzing in your face.” She swatted her hand at the imaginary Knox gnat.

Johnny grinned.

They had just passed the library when a very large boy Johnny hadn’t seen before jumped in their path. He stood a full three inches taller than Johnny and was half again as wide.

“Well, isn’t this sweet! Two lovebirds strolling together to school!” The boy’s voice bottomed out a full octave lower than Johnny’s. He walked up to them, close enough that Johnny smelled garlic on his breath. “I get why you like her,” he said to Johnny, sizing Emmy up, “but honestly, Toots, I have no idea what you see in this sap.”

Emmy bellowed, “What I see is intelligence! But I don’t expect you to recognize it since you obviously have none yourself!”

The sneer on the boy’s face fell so fast Johnny might have thought his chin had been greased. He turned to walk away . . . then quickly spun back around and slugged Johnny square in the eye.

Once the stars stopped spinning and he regained his senses, Johnny realized that he was on his back in the snow looking up into what he could see of the gray sky. Most of his view was obstructed by the boy, who towered over him. It was obvious to Johnny that the thug wasn’t finished.

“What was that for?” Johnny asked, standing back up.

“Your girl insulted me. Well . . . I ain’t gonna hit no girl.”

Johnny got into his karate stance, just in case round two started. Instead, Emmy jumped in front of him and slugged the boy hard on the shoulder.

The brute laughed. “You hit like a girl! But at least you put up a fight, which is more than I can say for your boyfriend.”

Just then, Wilson Knox ran up. “Hey! Knock it off, Farnsworth!”

The boy stepped back a foot.

"Leave them alone!" Wilson commanded.

"I didn't mean nuthin' by it," the boy said, raising his hands in surrender.

The moment seemed oddly staged to Johnny. The boy could easily have handled Wilson if he wanted to. But for some reason the presence of Wilson Knox defused the situation.

"Thanks, Wilson," Johnny said, "but Emmy packs a harder punch than he does. You might want to protect this guy from her."

Emmy chuckled. The boy turned beet red. His nostrils flared. Johnny expected him to take another swing and readied himself. A few bystanders had gathered to watch.

"Get lost. Now!" Wilson bellowed. "Or you're gonna have me to deal with!"

He's grandstanding! Johnny thought.

The bully slowly nodded. "Sure. Sure, I'll leave." He bent down to pick up his school bag.

Johnny relaxed, brushed the snow off his clothes, and took off his cap to straighten his hair. He turned quickly when Emmy screamed, "Look out!"

The boy's fist swung wildly toward Johnny's face. But before it could connect, one of the bystanders grabbed the boy's arm, twisted it behind his back, and flung him to the ground.

"Maybe you oughta pick on someone your own size," the man chided.

The boy jumped up, and Johnny wondered whether he would actually fight back. Instead, he straightened his clothes and chuckled, "My father taught me to respect my elders. I wouldn't want to hurt an old geezer like you."

The man smiled smugly. "Well I appreciate that. Now clear out."

Wilson chimed in again. "Yeah, Farnsworth. Clear out. Now!"

This time, Johnny thought Wilson actually meant it.

The boy huffed and walked away toward the school. The

other bystanders walked off as well, chattering about how disrespectful kids were these days and how they never behaved that way in their day.

The man gently lifted Johnny's chin. "That eye's already swelling," he said.

Johnny turned to him. "I noticed. Thanks for your help, mister."

Emmy pointedly added, "And thank *you,* too, Wilson."

Johnny reluctantly agreed. "Yeah, thanks."

Wilson jerked his head, flinging a long shock of hair out of his eyes. He stood a bit straighter, and his chest puffed out. "You're welcome. I saw you were in trouble and thought I should step in."

Emmy turned to Johnny, sizing up his injury. "What is it with boys? They always have to use their fists to settle things."

"I used my face." Johnny winced. "Though I recall you giving him a nice punch."

"That's different," she dismissed.

Johnny held out his hand to the man. "I'm John Whittaker."

The man took his hand and shook it. "You can call me Al. And who's your girlfriend?"

Johnny started to explain that he and Emmy weren't boyfriend and girlfriend, but Emmy beat him to the that punch as well.

"I'm Emmy. And . . . we're just friends."

"Ah. Nice to meet you, Emmy."

Wilson held out his hand. "I'm Wilson. Emmy and I are—"

"Just friends too," Emmy interjected.

Johnny smiled. Then winced again. His face throbbed.

Al noticed. "You might wanna get some ice on that. It's a beaut."

"Maybe I should lay my face back down in the snow where that kid put it," Johnny smirked. "Who was that goon anyway?"

"Farnsworth," Wilson jumped in. "Lazlo Farnsworth. He's new. Just started Monday."

“Where did he come from?” Johnny asked.

“How would I know?” Wilson looked offended by the question.

“So, Mr. Al,” Emmy asked, “do you live here? I don’t remember seeing you.”

“Nah. Visiting relatives. Though it is a nice town,” he said, looking up and down the street.

“Who?” Johnny asked.

“Who what?”

“Who are your relatives?”

“Oh . . .” Al seemed oddly surprised by the question. He brushed it off. “No one you’d know.”

“It’s a small town,” Johnny said. “I probably—”

“Should get to school,” the man interrupted. “And I need to take off myself. Errands.” He put his hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “Take care.” Then he winked. “Oh, and you might practice blocking punches. I don’t think you’ve seen the last of Lazlo Farnsworth.”

“Johnny can take of himself,” Emmy said. “He knows karate.”

Al looked impressed. “I’ve heard about that stuff. I’d best watch myself around you.”

“Karate didn’t help me see that punch coming,” Johnny moaned.

“But now that you know he uses the element of surprise, it will. See ya around,” Al said, walking back toward Main Street.

“Don’t worry,” Wilson interjected. “I’ll take care of that bully. He won’t bother you again.”

In the distance, the school bell rang.

Johnny slung his bag over his shoulder. “Let’s go, Emmy. We’re gonna be late for class.”

“Emmy *and* Wilson,” Emmy corrected.

“Right,” Johnny sighed. “And Wilson.”

As soon as he walked into school, Johnny went to the nurse’s

office and got an ice pack to put on his eye. After an hour or so, most of the swelling had gone down, though it was still bruised and sore.

As Emmy had said, school was definitely in Christmas mode. Almost every class used a holiday theme. In history, Mr. Greeley talked about ancient Israel around the time of Christ's birth. Astronomy was the ticket in science. Mr. Bustamonte had them charting the stars the wise men might have seen on their trek to Bethlehem, and for a bonus, writing a paper postulating what the star that led the Magi could have been. Math was . . . well, math, which Johnny loved.

But the big surprise came at lunch. Principal Ambrose walked across the stage in the cafeteria and clapped sharply. "All right, students, settle down!" He glowered over his oval-rimmed glasses. Everyone quieted their conversations and turned to face him.

"As you all know," he resumed, "because of the Depression, most schools have had to make hard choices about which classes to eliminate and which to keep. We've been fortunate in not having to curtail much beyond our music program. Other areas of the country have shortened school hours and even reduced the number of months school is offered. Not North Carolina, thank goodness. We know the importance of a proper education here in the Tar Heel State!"

Arty, never one to let a thought inside his head stay inside his head, spouted, "I'm happy to come less if that helps!" He laughed. His head swiveled back and forth, scanning the room to see the others who laughed along with him. No one did.

"If you speak out of turn again, Mr. Moore, you'll be spending *more* hours . . . in detention. As for now, you will sit in the corner."

Arty plopped onto the stool and scowled at the principal in silence.

Principal Ambrose continued. "As I said, our fair state is committed to ensuring a robust academic experience for you all." He raised his index finger. "However . . . we are suffering from a paucity of funds. Therefore, in order to raise some much-needed capital, the faculty and I have decided to share

your talents with the community in the form of a holiday play! And the production we have decided upon is an adaptation of Charles Dickens's immortal classic *A Christmas Carol*!"

An excited buzz filled the room. Principal Ambrose glowered at them until the buzz subsided. "I'm certain the community will rally around the event, and the proceeds from sales of the tickets will help us curb our deficit. The play will be directed by our very own English teacher, Mrs. Alma Wagner." He gestured toward her, and the students politely applauded.

Mrs. Wagner stood, looking a bit embarrassed by the attention, and made her way to the stage.

"Thank you all," she began. "I'm honored and pleased to be placed in charge of the production. We will spend the remaining class periods this afternoon auditioning for the speaking roles. You do not have to audition, but everyone is required to participate in the production in some capacity. As this play is a fund-raiser for the school, it will be our major focus until Christmas break. Because of that, your performance must be of the highest quality. Therefore, I expect twice the effort from you, three times the attention from you—"

Principal Ambrose interjected, "And four times the respect that Mrs. Wagner, as your director, is due. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Principal Ambrose," the students answered in unison.

Ambrose nodded back to Mrs. Wagner.

"You'll be graded on your participation, so I highly advise that you prepare well." She looked around the room. "Are there any questions?"

The only reaction was the nervous and eager faces of the students.

Mrs. Wagner smiled. "Very well. Auditions will commence after lunch."

The auditions didn't take very long. Not many wanted a speaking role, Johnny included. He liked *A Christmas Carol* a lot. The family had read it together every year since he was four, but with everything going on right now he didn't want to take on another big project. He did think it might be fun to play the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come since the character had no lines and just pointed a lot, but Mrs. Wagner said she wanted someone tall in the part, which Johnny definitely wasn't.

He was mentally relegating himself to being a nondescript townsperson or working on the sets and costumes, when Wilson walked onto the stage holding a script. "I wanna read for Scrooge," he growled. Stifled snickers echoed through the cafeteria. Mrs. Wagner nodded and Wilson began reading.

This should be good, Johnny thought sarcastically.

But it wasn't good.

It was great.

Wilson all but transformed before everyone's eyes. His face scowled, his body bent, his voice became even more sneery than usual.

"What is Christmas but a time for spending money one doesn't have?" he intoned. "For finding oneself a year older but not an hour richer? A time for balancing books, filled with deadbeats who'll beg and cry and whimper for more time to pay what they owe! Humbug on Christmas, I say! If I had my way, every fool who spouted 'Merry Christmas' should be boiled alive in eggnog and stabbed with a branch of holly through his heart!"

When he finished, everyone sat in stunned silence. Mrs. Wagner smiled and said, "Well done, Mr. Knox! Thank you!"

Wilson looked around the room, snorted, and exited the stage.

Suddenly, Johnny *really* wanted the part of Ebenezer Scrooge.

"Is there anyone else who would like to read?" Mrs. Wagner called.

Johnny jumped up, picked up a script, and made his way to the stage.

Mrs. Wagner peered up at him. “Mr. Whittaker?”

“I’m reading for Scrooge too.”

The teacher nodded and the room went silent again.

Johnny thumbed through the pages and quickly found the section he wanted. He took a moment to scan the lines, then launched into the scene.

“Nonsense!” he barked in a voice even sneerier than Wilson’s, and the audience jumped. “That was nothing, nothing at all! Just some remains of an underwhelming supper from a rather greasy pub.” He rubbed his belly and scowled. “A bit of undigested beef.” He burped. The kids laughed. “Or a crumb of moldy cheese.” He held his nose and fanned his face with the script. Another laugh.

“Jacob Marley! Pfaugh! Whatever it was, there’s more of gravy in it than of grave!” He squelched another burp, bulging his cheeks and bugging out his eyes, like Harpo Marx. The room roared with laughter.

He dropped the script, moved to the footlights, and peered out at the crowd through squinted eyes. “There’s no more of Jacob Marley in my doorknocker than Father Christmas himself within my chimney! Humbug on loose imaginations and the bedlam they cause. Humbug, I say!” He huffed and turned his back to them.

There was a pause, and then the room erupted in applause and cheers.

Mrs. Wagner smiled from ear to ear. She motioned for the applause to cease, and said, “That was . . . excellent, Mr. Whittaker!” Johnny smiled and nodded, retrieved the script, and left the stage. Mrs. Wagner turned to the crowd. “Is there anyone else?”

But it seemed no one wanted to follow Johnny.

Mrs. Wagner took a deep breath and said, “Thank you all! A truly fine job by everyone. I shall post the cast list at the end of the day!”

Johnny placed the script back on the table. He noticed Wilson glaring at him. He smiled; it felt good. In fact, it was the first time he’d felt this good in quite a while.

And it lasted almost five minutes. That’s when Emmy

confronted him in the hallway. “What was *that*?” she exclaimed. “You can act, too? I thought you weren’t even interested in being in the play!”

Johnny shrugged. “I changed my mind.”

“Because of Wilson?”

“No,” he simpered. She glared at him. “Well . . . maybe a little.”

Emmy scoffed and rolled her eyes. “You really do love being the center of attention, don’t you?” She turned and walked away.

“Hey, there’s no guarantee I’m gonna get the part!” he called after her.

But when the cast list was posted, he saw that he *had* won the role of Scrooge. And even better, Wilson was cast . . . as his understudy.

Wilson steamed when he saw the list but said nothing. Arty was tagged to be the ghost of Jacob Marley. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come went to none other than that goon Lazlo, which made sense, as he stood head and shoulders over all the other students. Emmy was cast as Belle, Scrooge’s love interest, which made Johnny rather uncomfortable. He recalled from the story that Scrooge and Belle held hands, but didn’t remember if things got mushier. He doubted whether Mrs. Wagner would let it go any further than that. At least he hoped she wouldn’t.

The play was set for December twenty-second. Plenty of time to practice and get the sets built and costumes put together.

Johnny was thankful for the distractions of the day and the festive feelings they evoked, though they only lasted a little while. In the back of his mind, behind his throbbing eye, he couldn’t stop thinking about who took the healing cloth and how he was going to get it back. Not to mention the new school bully and the shiner he’d need to explain to his folks.

Chapter Four

"Mommy, Daddy, Johnny's eye looks like a fat raccoon!"

He'd been hoping his folks wouldn't notice—his father because he was reading his newspaper, and Fiona because, well, she couldn't. But he'd forgotten about Charlie, who brought up his black eye the minute he walked into the house.

Of course. *Sisters*, he thought.

"You've been fighting," Harold stated.

Here comes trouble, Johnny thought. "Not really," Johnny rebutted. "Unless you call someone hitting you and you falling down a fight."

Fiona panicked. "Can you see all right? Lord, please don't let him lose his sight!"

Harold quickly calmed her down. "It's a black eye, Fiona. Boys get them every day." He turned to Johnny and pointedly raised his eyebrows. "But I don't want you fighting. Understood?"

Johnny understood. Harold hadn't heard about his other fights—thanks to Fiona, who had always covered up for him. Now here she was, frightened at the mere thought of an eye injury. He was determined to keep her from worrying about it again.

He also decided to keep quiet about the school play for

now. Telling Fiona he had gotten the lead in a play she could not see might add her misery.

At bedtime Harold brought Johnny some ice. “That’s quite the shiner.” A faint smile crept onto his face. “I guess those karate lessons didn’t work so well, eh?”

Johnny gingerly placed the ice bag on his eye. “I didn’t even have time to defend myself. Honest, Dad, I didn’t start the fight. This kid had it in for me. I’m sorry it scared Fiona so much. Oh, and speaking of that, there’s something else you need to know, too.” He told his father about being cast as Ebenezer Scrooge.

Harold shook his head in wonder. “Y’know, sometimes I’m amazed at how much happens to you in a single day.” Johnny smiled and shrugged. Harold looked thoughtful and then said, “First of all, congratulations on getting the lead in the play. And you were right not to mention it. I’ll tell your mother when the time is more opportune. As for this new kid . . . well . . . hang in there. Oftentimes bullies are the very ones who become your best friends.”

The next day began with McDuff licking Johnny’s face, his tail wagging happily. Johnny managed a smile and then grimaced because his eye still hurt. He scratched dutifully behind McDuff’s ear. McDuff jumped off the bed and pattered over to the door, waiting for Johnny to let him out. Johnny complied and then shivered—his room was freezing.

He walked over to check the forecast from his barometer. Though the morning sky was clear, the barometer indicated that more snow was on the way. “Interesting,” he muttered to the device. “We’ll see how right you are.”

He set the barometer on the windowsill and headed to the bathroom, where he washed up and combed his tousled hair. He then went back to his room; put on his white button-up shirt, plaid knee socks, long knickers, and sneakers (in that order); and plodded down the stairway.

The family was at the table. Charlie was already halfway

through her bowl of oatmeal. Her prunes sat undisturbed. Harold had his face buried in the morning paper. Fiona was a few bites into a piece of buttered toast and sipping her morning cup of Folgers coffee.

"Good morning, John Avery," she said with a forced lilt. "Have a seat. I'll get your oatmeal."

"I can do it," he responded.

"Nonsense, lad. Sit!" she said, standing up. A twinge of acerbic bite sharpened the tone of her voice. He'd never heard her speak so abrasively before. She walked five steps—obviously premeditated—then reached out to the big pot on the stove.

Johnny looked over to his father. The newspaper in his hands didn't move, but his eyes did. He watched closely as Fiona found her way to the oatmeal, carefully ladled a portion of it into a bowl, and took the five steps back to the table. She held the bowl out toward where Johnny sat.

"Here you go. Eat up." Weariness covered her face like war paint.

Johnny accepted the bowl. "Oh, I meant to tell you: Emmy and her folks said that if you ever need anything, they're ready to help."

Fiona stiffened. "Well, that's very nice of them, but I think we'll manage, like we always do."

"It's just . . ." He looked at his father, who gave no indication what he thought of this information, and then at Charlie, who was trying to hide her prunes in the uneaten remnants of her oatmeal. "With all that's happened it might be easier if—"

Fiona sat down. "I don't hear ya chewing yet," she said tersely. "That food isn't going to jump into your mouth, ya know. Eat, John."

Since the day Fiona had joined their family, she always referred to him affectionately as John Avery. Leaving his middle name out now felt to him like a definitive pause in her affection. Johnny didn't know whether to feel hurt or concerned. But he knew one thing. The look his father shot him at that very moment meant, "Eat your breakfast and be

quiet."

Johnny ate his breakfast.

Mrs. Wagner stood beside the chalkboard in front of the stage. "This morning we will concentrate on sets and costumes; this afternoon, on rehearsal. There will be no recess today. We need to use every minute on the production. As the Bard, William Shakespeare, would say, 'the play's the thing.' On this chalkboard you will see the breakdown of responsibilities for every one of you."

Wilson scanned the board. "Why am I assigned to costumes? I should be building stuff."

"I've assigned each of you according to your particular skill set. You, Mr. Knox, are not a skilled builder of . . . 'stuff.'"

Johnny and Emmy scanned the board. When they found their names, they both broke out in huge grins. As the rest of the students began their tasks, they approached the teacher.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Wagner?"

"Yes, Mr. Whittaker?"

"You have Emmy and me down to work with Ben Huck?"

"That's correct," the teacher nodded. "He's making some electrical devices for the performance, and he requested that you two assist him. He said you have a propensity for electronics."

"Me?" Emmy exclaimed, and Johnny quickly frowned at her. She got the hint. "Meee-oh-my! That's nice of him!"

"I'm glad you approve, Miss Capello. Now off you go."

"Yes, ma'am!" Johnny and Emmy raced out of the cafeteria and downstairs to Ben's custodial room.

They found Ben sitting on a stool, reading *Forty-Two Years in the White House* by Irwin Hood Hoover. Seeing them enter, he smiled, bent down the corner of the page where he left off, and closed the book. "My new assistants. C'mon in!"

"Reporting for duty, sir!" Johnny said with a salute.

Johnny loved Ben's room. The tools, the gadgets, the

workbench, even the clutter somehow made him feel right at home. “So Mrs. Wagner wants some electrical devices for the play, huh?”

Ben nodded. “Yep. We can’t use candles or fire on stage, so we gotta come up with ’lectric devices that flicker like fire. She also wants us to make some lightnin’ effects for when the Christmas ghosts appear and take Scrooge on his journeys.”

Johnny nodded. “Sounds simple enough.” He noticed a table cluttered with wiring, a metal box, an electrical switch, a pile of rags, and several large speaker horns. Johnny nodded at the mess. “Are those our supplies?”

Ben glanced back at it. “Naw. That’s a different project. Fire alarm system for the school.”

Emmy’s eyes widened. “Why? Is the building dangerous?”

“Nah. Just being cautious.”

“Mind if I take a look?” Johnny asked.

Ben waved them on. “Help y’self.”

Johnny and Emmy moved to the table, and Ben followed, pointing out the items in the system. “It’s pretty basic. Them’s the speakers; this here is the control box. The speakers are wired to it. The box has a ’lectrical circuit and a buzzer built in. ’Lectricity runs through the circuit, which keeps the buzzer from buzzin’. Pull the switch, the circuit’s broken, and the buzz begins. Lemme show ya.”

He plugged the control box into an outlet and flipped the switch. Instantly, a loud buzz filled the room.

Emmy put her hands over her ears. “That’s annoying!” she exclaimed over the din.

“Imagine it goin’ through these big speakers!” Ben hollered, turning the switch off.

Johnny examined the control box. “It’s a lot like how the class bell works, right?”

Ben nodded. “Pretty much, but with speakers instead of bells. Still needs a mite more work, but when it’s done, if they’s a fire and someone throws the switch, it’ll for sure get everyone’s attention.”

“It’d be great if it could alert the fire station too,” Johnny muttered thoughtfully.

“Come again?” said Ben.

“Oh, I was just thinking if, when you pulled the switch, it not only sent the buzz to the speakers but also sent a signal to the fire station. That way they’d arrive quicker.”

Ben’s eyes lit up. “Smart idea.”

“There’s only one problem,” Emmy interjected. “Provenance doesn’t have a fire station.”

Johnny cocked his head to one side. “Well, yeah, there’s *that* . . .”

Emmy looked thoughtful, then added, “But maybe we could use these speakers as a sort of sound system for the play.”

“Sound system?” asked Ben.

“You know, hook them up to microphones next to the stage so everyone in the room can hear the lines better. We could even use them for music and nifty sounds for the Christmas ghosts.”

“That’s a great idea, Emmy!” Johnny exclaimed.

“Sho’ is!” Ben agreed. “I knew you’d be a big help on this project.”

Emmy grinned. “So . . . what do we do first?”

They spent the next hour or so drawing up plans. Ben taught Emmy how to use a soldering gun, and they worked up a small assembly line of sorts.

As they settled into their routine, Emmy asked, “So how was your trip to visit your mother, Ben? Did you have a good Thanksgiving?”

“Very nice, thank you. I miss having Mama around.”

“She lives in Mississippi?” Johnny asked.

Ben nodded. “Tupelo. She’s a maid for a family there. Been with ’em since she was sixteen. They lived here in Provenance for the longest time until they inherited an estate. I tried coaxing Mama to stay, but she’s fiercely loyal—couldn’t imagine leaving the family she’s been workin’ for so long. ‘They wouldn’t know which end was up,’ she said.”

Emmy soldered a connection and waved away the wisp of smoke. “But your father doesn’t live there, does he?”

“No. Daddy can’t stay in one place too long. He lingers for

a spell, then goes off gallivantin' again." Ben shook his head. "Mama don't complain though. Not that she ever would."

"Mothers go through a lot," Johnny said quietly.

Ben laid his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "From what I hear, Fiona's a strong woman too. She's walkin' a rough road fo' sure, but she'll make it through. Y'all will."

Johnny nodded appreciatively. "How have you been feeling since the day at the still?"

"Good as ever," Ben answered. "Maybe even better."

"You still have no idea where the blood on your shirt came from?" Emmy asked.

Ben looked perplexed. "Not a clue. Don't remember much of anything from that day. Maybe I'd been huntin'? I do go out once or twice a month. But if'n I did shoot somethin', I got no idea where I left it. It sure ain't back home in my icebox."

He shrugged as he kept working. "Y'know, back in the French and Indian War, in one battle George Washington was singled out by the Indians. They were good shots. Rarely missed. His coat was shot through four times and two horses he was riding was kilt. But ol' George ne'er even got a nick on him!" Ben nodded his head in admiration. "Who knows? Maybe I'm like ol' George."

"Even if the bullet did miss you, that doesn't explain the blood," Emmy said.

"I dunno what to tell ya. It's a mystery. I am glad I wasn't shot, though. Daddy wouldn't never forgave hisself."

"I'm glad too," Emmy said. "Even if I can't make any sense of it."

"Ya know, my Mama used to say that common sense only takes you so far. Beyond that you gotta walk in faith." He looked hard into Johnny's eyes. "That's good advice for us all."

Johnny smiled perfunctorily. He didn't think faith had ever done him any favors. Sometimes life seemed like one big punch in the face. Speaking of which . . .

"Have you met that big oaf Lazlo Farnsworth yet?"

One of Ben's eyebrows shot up like a gopher popping its head out of a hole. "Yeah, I've had the pleasure. Word is his

folks couldn't take care of him no more 'cause his father's been without work. So he came to live with his uncle on a farm outside town. This depression's still biting hard."

"The kid's as stout as a bull," Johnny snorted.

"That where you got your black eye?" Ben asked.

Johnny grimaced and nodded. "He snuck up on me."

Ben's head bobbed as he laughed. "Can't imagine a boy that size sneakin' anywheres. The uncle thinks he has a shot at playin' football for Duke."

Emmy said, "I'll bet Arty's sore that he's not the big bully about town anymore."

"Arty oughta be glad. Maybe he'll get his life ironed out a bit."

"I wouldn't hold my breath," Johnny said sourly.

"Never do," Ben responded. "You two steer clear of Farnsworth. That black eye's an introduction. He'll be happy to give you an encore—and more. Now let's get the rest of these 'lectric candles done."

They finished the morning with Ben, then spent the afternoon rehearsing. During the blocking of Johnny's scene with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Lazlo used every opportunity to bump, poke, elbow, and shove Johnny when Mrs. Wagner wasn't looking. Johnny was sure he'd be black-and-blue by the end of rehearsal. How was he supposed to avoid the goon when they were in a play together?

Chapter Five

When he got home that afternoon it was still light outside, so Johnny decided to have a little fun and romp around in the snow for a while.

"I'll be in the backyard," he called.

"Take your sister with you," Harold said.

Johnny cringed. So much for fun.

Fortunately, Charlie said, "I don't want to go outside. It's too cold. I want to play with my dolls."

"I'll take the dog instead," Johnny noted. "C'mon, McDuff!" Boy and dog bolted through the door before another word could be said.

The air felt invigorating. Johnny bent down and packed a baseball-sized snowball. He then imagined himself as a pitcher in the majors, staring down Babe Ruth. He leaned forward, shook his head, shook it again, then nodded, straightened up, and let it fly. If the Great Bambino had been at the plate he would have taken it in the ear. Johnny frowned but packed together another snowball for his second pitch. This one flew over home plate and left the slugger fanning the wind. Johnny smiled smugly.

At third base, McDuff barked. Johnny looked over and the mutt was sniffing and yapping beside the shed. Johnny called

time-out and walked over for a conference with his canine coach.

As he approached the shed he froze in his tracks. A set of footprints in the snow led from the woods behind their house to the shed door.

Nobody had been by in days, other than Emmy, and her footprints came from her house, which was in the opposite direction. Anyway, these prints were made by a much bigger shoe than she wore. Perhaps Johnny's father had been outside? Not likely. When he wasn't helping Fiona, Harold spent the remainder of his time in his study.

Johnny examined the prints. They made the same pattern as his galoshes, only several inches bigger. But they didn't look much deeper than his tracks. The person who made them was either a skinny adult or a kid with exceptionally large feet.

Determining the path the footprints took was a challenge since they walked over themselves in places. Whoever made those tracks had to have done it after the snow ended a few days ago. If the goal had been to find the cloth, the person was, as the saying goes, a day late and a dollar short. More likely though, it was a hobo looking for shelter from the cold.

Johnny opened the door wide enough to let the light in. McDuff dashed in front of him, sniffing and snorting the scents left by the trespasser. Perhaps McDuff would sniff out a clue.

Johnny scanned about. Nothing looked out of order. That was the problem. The shed *always* looked out of order. Fiona pleaded over and over for Harold to clean the shed, and he always answered, "It's a shed. It's supposed to be messy." Plus, Johnny and his father had fairly ransacked the place when they searched for the cloth. It wasn't especially tidy now, but things had been picked up and moved about. That suggested to Johnny that someone who needed shelter had reorganized things enough to make room for him or herself.

McDuff wheeled around in a circle several times beside Johnny's bike. Expecting the hound had discovered something important, Johnny eagerly watched. Instead, the dog lay

down in a tight ball, and shut its eyes for a nap. *So much for being on the case*, Johnny thought.

On a whim, Johnny rummaged around again for the cloth. Fresh eyes may find things that were missed in the rush of adrenaline.

He systematically worked his way through the shed, constantly having to step over McDuff, who obstinately refused to budge. At one point, a glimpse of white caught Johnny's eye. But it turned out to be just a bit of snow that had drifted in. Finding nothing, Johnny called for McDuff, "Let's go, boy!" The terrier jumped up and pranced outside.

Johnny stopped. Something caught his eye—a folded piece of paper was stuck under the wheel of his bike where McDuff had lain. Johnny picked up the paper and read it.

"Ingreediants—one batteree, jumper cabels, rags, lightning. Go back. Like Tommas Edison said—try, try again."

Strange. Although it had been written from Johnny's perspective, no one who knew him would believe he had written it. He won most of the class spelling bees. And he would never attribute an errant quote to anyone, *especially* Thomas Edison, one of his heroes. He was convinced he knew who *had* written the note though—the boy he saw by the water tower when he first moved to town. This would be the third mysterious note the boy had penned, and Johnny still didn't know who he was.

After reading it again, Johnny was certain it was suggesting he look again for the healing cloth. But how would the boy know where the cloth was—unless he took it? And if he did take it, why not simply return it instead of leaving a cryptic note? Johnny did reason one thing: The place he needed to "go back" to had to be the water tower. That was where the experiment had taken place and where he'd seen the mysterious boy.

Johnny exited the shed. It was getting on toward evening, and darkness was falling rapidly. He peered through the window into the house. His parents and Charlie sat at the dining room table—they hadn't started making supper yet. If he slipped away quickly, he could be back before they even

knew he had left. “What do you think, McDuff?” The dog gave him a puzzled whine.

He was just about to take off when he heard the phone ring. He saw Harold rise to answer it. Johnny went to the back door and crept inside with McDuff. As he moved slowly toward the dining room, Harold’s side of the conversation became clearer.

“Yes,” his father said solemnly. “Yes, Doctor, I’m familiar with that. . . . Are you certain? . . . I understand. . . . Thank you for getting back to us so quickly. Good-bye.” He hung up the phone.

There was a long moment of silence. Then Fiona said, “Out with it, Harold. No beating around the bush.”

Harold took a deep breath. “That was the doctor in Raleigh.” Johnny thought his father’s voice sounded ancient, hollow. Harold continued. “The test results are back. He wanted to call and say . . . they . . . aren’t . . .” He sighed. Tears welled up in his eyes.

“There’s nothing they can do,” Fiona said, “is there?”

Harold’s head drooped. “No.”

Fiona sat stoically, barely moving a muscle. After a moment, she took in a deep breath and said, “So that’s it, then. . . . I truly am . . . blind.” She let out a muffled sob.

Harold rushed to her side. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart!” he said, the tears now running down his cheeks. He took her hand and she grabbed it with both of hers. Charlie sat at the other end of the table, wide-eyed, silent, large tears trickling down her face as well.

Johnny entered the room, picked Charlie up, set her in her mother’s lap, and gave his stepmother the warmest, tightest embrace he could, his own face wet with sorrow. Harold wrapped his family in his arms, and for a long while they all wept together.

The barometer was accurate: that night did bring more snow. Johnny slept very little; instead, he sat in his desk chair and,

through his bedroom window, watched the flakes drift softly and silently to the ground. *Is life as aimless as those snowflakes?* he wondered. He'd been taught that there was a purpose in everything. That God was all-knowing and all-powerful. But if that were true, how could God let Fiona go blind? Perhaps instead, life was just a series of daily occurrences of happenstance. And if it was, even if he did find the healing cloth, could it reverse things? *Would* it?

Johnny looked down at McDuff sleeping on the floor beside his chair.

It had for a dog.

It had for Ben Huck.

But it hadn't for Steve.

Why?

Johnny had no answer. He wasn't even sure there *was* an answer. But he knew one thing: he had to at least find the cloth and try.

At first light he rose from his chair and shook McDuff awake. "C'mon, boy. We have an errand to run before school —one I hope will make this a really nice Christmas for everyone!"

Johnny dressed quickly, and he and McDuff slipped down the stairs and out the door. They ran to the tower, which wasn't easy to do through the mounting layers of fresh snow. Johnny worried that even if the cloth was there, it would be impossible to find.

As soon as they arrived, he tried to get McDuff to sniff the cloth out, but the clueless dog responded to his command with doe-eyed confusion. After a few minutes of rooting around, Johnny found the wires leading down from the tower. He traced them to where they would terminate at the battery. And he soon found the spot. The battery, though, was gone. He scratched away the snow in a five-foot radius, assuming that if the mysterious boy had deposited the cloth here, he would have placed it close to where the battery should have been. Nothing. Johnny then walked along the fence line bordering Granville House in case the wind had caught the cloth. Again, nothing. He even got desperate and looked

inside Granville House, and down by where the still had been. But as before, he found nothing.

"How could I have been so stupid?" he muttered. "That note had to have been in the shed since Tuesday. Why didn't I check it?" He sighed. "On the other hand, why *would* I have checked it?" He growled, kicked a small clump of snow savagely, hailed McDuff, and ran back home, slipping the entire way.

He hoped to get home before the rest of the family awoke. He debated whether to tell his father about the note and decided he would not. But when he walked in the front door and saw everyone sitting at the table and Harold giving him "the look," he changed his mind. Sharing the note might be a good idea after all.

"Where were you?" Harold said in that deadly calm tone of his.

"Just taking a walk, trying to clear my mind."

"You should nae go off without telling anyone where you've gone, John Avery," Fiona said.

"No, you shouldn't," Harold agreed. His eyes burned with anger.

Charlie piped up. "Johnny's in trouble, a-a-a-ga-in," she sang softly.

"All right, Charlie," Fiona chided. "That's enough."

Charlie looked down at her eggs, and Johnny used that moment to mouth to Harold, "I need to talk to you," complete with overenunciation and small hand gestures.

Harold's expression changed. His eyes narrowed and he nodded slightly.

"I'm sorry if I worried you," Johnny said. "I just needed some air."

"I understand," Fiona replied. She reached out and found her husband's arm. "Boys will be boys, eh, Harold?"

Harold patted her hand and said, "Some boys more than others. But I still want to talk to you, young man." He pointed. "My office. Now."

"Yes, sir," Johnny responded. The two made their way down the hallway to the inner sanctum.

“Don’t be too hard on him, Harold,” Fiona called out. “We’ve had enough harshness in this house of late.”

Behind closed doors, Johnny showed his father the note and told him all that had happened.

Harold frowned. “I can’t help thinking that if you had just brought the cloth to me in the first place, we could have avoided this mess.”

A wave of resentment arose in Johnny, and he almost retorted, but stopped himself. He had dodged one bullet that morning—no sense standing in front of another one.

Harold continued. “There’s still a chance that it could be there somewhere, under the snow.”

“It’s possible,” Johnny said with a hint of frustration. “But I looked everywhere that made sense to me.”

Harold stroked his chin. “I need to go into town this afternoon to get a prescription for Fiona. Meet me at the water tower after school and we’ll look again. If it is there, we’ll find it.”

Johnny nodded. “Dad . . . do you think Professor Mangle might have taken the cloth? He doesn’t live far from the water tower. He might have seen it there.”

Harold gazed up at the ceiling thoughtfully. “To be honest, I wondered that myself.”

“You did?”

“Karl has a vested interest in finding this cloth. He could use it on Steve, for one. He’s also quite . . . ambitious. And I’m pretty sure he suspects we have it because of the journal.”

Johnny took a deep breath. “That day we went to the hospital to see Steve . . . I took the cloth with me.”

Harold quickly turned his gaze to Johnny. His eyes were wide in surprise. “And?”

“I put it on him. It didn’t do anything.” Johnny shrugged. “Obviously.”

Harold pondered for a time, and the two stood in silence. Johnny walked to the bay window. The flocked tree limbs of the massive oak in their backyard swayed gently in the wind. Two squirrels scampered under the branches, foraging for food. The scene reminded Johnny of a picture postcard he saw

at the Woolworths store on Main Street in Durham.

Harold perched on his desk, tapping nervously on his fingers with a pencil. “Perhaps I’ll have a little chat with Karl.”

The idea struck Johnny as odd. “But what would you say? ‘Did you steal a cloth from my shed?’”

Harold snorted. “I have no idea what I’d say that wouldn’t insult him. He’ll be offended if the accusation isn’t true. Maybe even more so if it is.”

An idea crept into Johnny’s mind. “How about if I go visit Steve? I’d like to check in on him anyway, and if Professor Mangle has the cloth and tried to use it, Steve would say something—especially since I tried the cloth on him before.”

Harold mulled the idea over. “We have nothing to lose, I suppose. And above everything, Steve is your friend and it would be good to visit him.” He finally nodded. “Fine. We’ll check the water tower this afternoon. If we don’t find the cloth there, I’ll drive you to the hospital.”

The school day crept by. Johnny was so distracted with thoughts of the cloth that he couldn’t concentrate, much to the consternation of Mrs. Wagner, Emmy, and Ben—and to the delight of Lazlo and Wilson. As soon as school was dismissed, Johnny told Emmy he wouldn’t be able to walk home with her and raced out the school doors, making a beeline for the water tower.

Harold was there waiting for him, a few garden tools in hand to help with the job. Harold used a shovel while Johnny used a garden rake. After more than an hour of arduous searching in the snow, they reluctantly decided the cloth was simply not there.

“Let me have a look at that note again,” Harold said. Johnny pulled it from his pocket and handed it to his father. Harold read it slowly, seeming to digest every word. “I don’t know, John. It could just mean to try your experiment again.”

“Sure, but why leave a note to say that? And why would

the word *rags* be underlined? And why would someone put this note in the shed *after* the cloth disappeared? It wasn't there when we rummaged through the shed before."

"Fair questions." He handed the note back to Johnny.

"So I guess I'm going to the hospital to visit Steve?"

Harold shook his head. "You won't have to. Karl called the house earlier. Steve was released from the hospital yesterday. Karl said you could stop by the house tomorrow for a visit."

"If Steve was well enough to go home, maybe Professor Mangle did use the cloth on him!"

"I don't think so," Harold said. "Karl told me that Steve hadn't completely recovered. Which is why he didn't want any company yet today."

"That doesn't mean Professor Mangle didn't take the cloth," Johnny mused. "I tried it on Steve and it didn't work. Professor Mangle may have done the same."

"We can't concern ourselves with *might*s and *maybe*s," Harold responded. "Hopefully we'll get some answers tomorrow."

The ride home was a quiet one, both of them lost in thought. When they pulled up to the house, they were met with a surprise. An unfamiliar woman stood at the front door. She held a rather large box and a basket covered with a towel.

Johnny and his father exited the car and walked up to the porch. The woman turned to them. "Howdy!" she said. She looked to be in her mid-thirties and wore a pink cotton floral dress under a heavy wool coat. She had dark-brown shoulder-length hair and a triangular nose, and she smiled the way a dog might after it chewed up your slippers. Johnny detected an assortment of tantalizing aromas wafting from both basket and box.

"May I help you?" Harold said.

"I'm Arrie. I work down at Hoops Diner. I been knockin' at yer door here, but nobody's answerin'—though I can hear talkin' inside."

Harold moved to the door. “Uh, yes, that’s my wife. She’s —”

“No need fer explainin’. Can I come in?” she asked.

“Of course,” Harold replied. “Just let me—”

Fiona called from inside. “Harold?”

She sounds panicked, Johnny thought.

Harold opened the door and entered. Arrie and Johnny followed. Fiona stood still as a statue next to the dining room table. Charlie peered around the kitchen door shyly. Harold moved to his wife. “It’s all right, Fiona.”

“Harold, I–I tried to answer, but I–I got turned around and I couldn’t–I couldn’t—”

“Sorry if I scared ya, dearie!” Arrie said sympathetically. “Didn’t mean no harm! Thomas down at the diner sent me over with a mess of vittles for you. He said the cook got carried away and he’d rather it go to good use. Where can I set it?”

Johnny could read his father’s face like a newspaper. The headline: “This family is not a charity case.” This was followed by the opposing argument: “But I cannot offend by refusing a thoughtful gesture.”

Harold reached for the box. “I’ll take it. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. I’m just doin’ what the boss told me to do.”

“It’s very kind of him,” Harold nodded, setting the box on the table. “We appreciate it. John, take the basket.”

Johnny removed his hat and took the basket from Arrie’s arm.

“Thankee, young man! You remind me of my brother. Same eyes as you. And his hair was curly when he was young, too. Turned straight when he got older. Strangest thing.”

“That happened to me as well,” Fiona said. She was trying to sound casual, but Johnny thought it came across as forced. “Though I wish I’d have been able to keep my curl.” She smiled weakly and dropped her hands to her sides.

“Fiona, this is Arrie,” Harold said, moving to her side. “She works at the diner.”

“I’m nae deaf, Harold. I heard her.” Stretching out her

hand, she said, “Nice to meet ye, Arrie. Ach, you brought food. It’s not necessary. I’m quite capable—”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Arrie interrupted, taking Fiona’s hand. “Folks’ve heard of yer plight. It’s a sorry state if we don’t heft part of the load when a neighbor hits hard times.”

Fiona forced another smile. “Tell ye what, if you’d like to join us, I’ll take this to the kitchen and make us up some plates—”

She reached out for the box of food, but Harold had set it precariously on the table’s edge. All it took was a slight bump of Fiona’s searching hand, and before Harold could catch it, the box toppled to the floor with a loud crash. Food splattered on the rug, the chairs, and the wall.

Fiona stiffened. No one said anything for a long moment.

Finally, Arrie said, “Now don’t worry ’bout a thang—I’ll have that cleaned up in no time.”

“That’s not necessary,” Harold said.

“We’ll get it,” Johnny added.

“Nae!” Everyone stopped and looked at Fiona. With a quivering voice she said, “Thank ye for stopping by, Arrie, and for bringin’ the food. And be sure and thank Thomas for us as well.”

Arrie looked from Harold to Johnny, then smiled, taking the hint. “Sure thing, darlin’.” She turned to leave. “Y’all have a blessed day. See ya when the sun starts shinin’ agin.” She walked out the door and closed it behind her.

“She was nice,” Charlie squeaked.

“Harold,” Fiona said stoically, “take me to my room, please.”

Harold took her hand and led her upstairs.

Johnny heard her crying the whole way.

Chapter Six

Saturday morning dawned bright and sunny. After rising from a fitful night's sleep during which he heard Fiona crying, Johnny got dressed and went downstairs to breakfast. The family ate in silence, and this time Fiona let Johnny get his own food.

Once he had finished, he washed and dried his dishes and then said, "I'm gonna go visit Steve now, if that's okay."

Fiona said nothing, just downed a long sip of coffee.

Harold nodded. "Just keep a watch on the time."

Johnny donned his coat and hat, slipped on his galoshes, and opening the front door, looked back at the table. A doleful air hung sullenly over his family. Johnny sighed, stepped outside, and closed the door behind him.

Twenty minutes later he knocked on the Mangles' front door, which was eventually answered by Mrs. Mangle. In the few times Johnny had interacted with her, he'd never seen the least hint of a smile on her face.

She stayed true to form. In spite of Steve's return home, she seemed as cheerless as ever.

"Steven's in his room. Down the hall on the left," she rasped.

Johnny got to Steve's room just as Paul was leaving it.

“Hey!” Johnny said.

Paul didn’t respond with anything more than a frown. He walked straight past Johnny, grabbed a coat, and went outside.

Odd, Johnny thought. But Paul always did seem a bit wacky. He shrugged and went into the bedroom.

Steve sat in an overstuffed chair, a white metal Spartan table in front of him. He held a pen and seemed to be doodling with it. Then Johnny got close enough to see that, much more than a doodle, it was a rather impressive work of art—a drawing of a small boy sitting in front of a fireplace and beside an ornate Christmas tree.

“I heard you liked to draw, but I didn’t realize you were this good,” Johnny said, bending over to admire Steve’s work.

“Thanks,” Steve said, adding some shading. “I’ve drawn several sketches. I want to make them into Christmas cards and try to sell them to help pay for some of the medical bills I’m piling up.”

“That’s a great idea. I’m sure lots of people would buy them. But how are you going to sell them?” Johnny asked.

“Not sure yet,” Steve answered, his pen still active. “Maybe Paul can peddle them door to door. Worthy cause, all that stuff.”

Johnny sat on the edge of Steve’s bed. “I could help. And I’m sure Emmy would. How many are you going to make?”

"Dad went to the newspaper in Durham and they offered to print as many as we wanted for free. So I don't know. A bunch, I guess."

"Well, count me in."

"Only if I pay you a percentage. Say . . . fifty percent."

Johnny laughed. "You'd make a terrible businessman. Pay me whatever you want; I'm just going to give it back to you to help with your expenses anyway."

"Sounds like you'd make a terrible businessman too," Steve rejoined.

"I'm sure I would," Johnny agreed. "That's all right. Being a businessman sounds pretty boring anyway. I want to be an explorer."

Steve nodded but still hadn't made eye contact.

After an awkward pause, Johnny said, "I'm really glad they let you come home. I was worried you might be in the hospital a lot longer."

"Thanks," Steve said succinctly.

Johnny wondered about the petulant tone in Steve's voice. He couldn't let it derail the purpose of his visit, though, so he plowed full steam ahead. "I thought I'd have to bring my magic cloth back for another try," he said, smiling as if it were a joke.

"You should know that Paul's pretty put out with you about that," Steve said.

"No wonder he didn't act very happy to see me just now."

Steve's pen stayed active. "He told me he was going to, 'mop you in the powth.' You should probably steer clear of him."

Johnny nodded. "Gotcha. And I don't want him to pop me in the mouth either, so . . . no more 'magic cloth.'"

Steve said, "We didn't say anything to Dad about it. Something like that would've bothered him, too."

Well, there was his answer. The cloth had not made an encore appearance.

Steve finally looked up. "Why are you here?"

The question took Johnny by surprise. "What do you mean? I came to see how you were doing."

Steve put his pen down on the table. “I thought maybe you came to apologize to my dad.”

“Apologize? For what?”

“You tell me,” Steve said.

“If you mean for exposing his still, I don’t have any reason to apologize. It was illegal. I know the money helped, but—”

“No, I don’t mean that. Dad admitted that he shouldn’t have done it.”

“Then . . . what?”

“I don’t know, but something’s going on. He gets a weird look on his face whenever I mention you.”

“Beats me.” Johnny forced a bit more cheer into his voice. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

Steve slowly directed his hand upward and scratched his nose. The effort appeared difficult. Johnny wondered whether Steve was actually getting weaker instead of better.

“So . . . are you serious about helping sell my cards?” Steve asked.

“Sure. We’re friends. And friends help each other. As soon as they’re ready, let me know.”

Steve chuckled. “Thanks. If you sell all of ’em, Paul might warm back up to you. He does love a good grudge, but he loves not having to work even more.”

“I’ll give it the old college try,” Johnny declared.

Steve’s grin grew bigger. “Then I’ll be sure my dad prints a lot of them.”

Johnny smirked and stood up to leave.

Steve said, “You aren’t leaving already, are you? You just got here. I was gonna offer to play ‘Don’t Chip the Tooth.’ It’s a hoot.”

“Never heard of it.”

“You see that jar of gumballs on my dresser? Those are the game pieces. You lie on the floor and I try bouncing gumballs off my table and into your mouth. But you can’t move.”

“You mean I just lie flat on the floor with my mouth open and trust you’ll be able to bounce them in?”

“Who said you weren’t bright?” Steve chided. “I do it with Paul a lot. And only chipped his tooth once.”

“And I get to keep the gumballs?”

“Well, I won’t want them back. Though we could leave them for Paul. It’d serve him right for being such a wet blanket.”

The boys played for hours, laughing and being silly. Johnny couldn’t remember the last time he had so much fun.

He didn’t think about Fiona’s accident or the missing cloth once the entire time.

Chapter Seven

Johnny left Steve's house in a fluster. He'd had such a good time that the day had sped away.

It was already dark when he turned onto Brewster Lane. It was one of the few roads in town with streetlamps on it, so it was easier to see as he trudged along the sidewalk through the icy layers of snow. People called streets with lights the "white way," and it was never truer than this night, with a new round of fat snowflakes falling.

Scents of ash and birch smoke wafted from the neighborhood chimneys. It was uncommonly quiet outside, with few people stirring. Most huddled inside, playing family games, listening to the Lux Radio Theatre broadcast or, if they were kids, wasting a perfectly good night taking their weekly bath.

Johnny walked past the old Granville House. Already, that place had been the hub of several adventures for him. He still had strong memories of his and Emmy's confrontation with Wilson Knox's greedy uncle in the clump of trees on the grounds called the Lover's Circle. And of finding the coffin lying in the crawl space under the main room of the house when Steve, Paul, and Emmy had broken through the floorboards. Not to mention Ben lying on the ground in the

property behind the place after he'd been shot by his own father. *I have to admit,* he thought, *life in Provenance has been anything but boring.*

Whack! A snowball clocked Johnny square in the back of the head. He heard a familiar laugh.

"What a shot!" It was Wilson Knox.

Johnny hated being surprised like that, and it was all he could do to keep from smacking Knox upside the head with something harder than a snowball.

"You didn't see that coming," Wilson teased as he walked up.

A thought popped into Johnny's head. "Sore about me taking the role of Scrooge from you?" he smirked.

Bull's-eye. He had struck a nerve. Wilson's smile faded and was replaced with a scowl. Johnny was turning to go when Wilson said, "What were you doing at the water tower yesterday? Digging for more gold?"

Johnny stopped in his tracks. "I was looking for some things from my experiment. What's it to you?"

"Bet you didn't find them."

Johnny wheeled around. "You took them?" he bellowed.

"Whoa, hold your horses, ke-mo sah-bee."

"How would you know I didn't find them unless you took them?" Johnny roared.

Wilson's smile returned. "I'm just giving you a hard time. Ease up. I don't even have a clue what was out there."

"My car battery and some rags and stuff."

"You and your dumb experiments."

"Tell me the truth, Knox! Did you take it?" Johnny yelled, a little more forcefully than he intended.

"Ha! Who would give a hoot about that junk?" Wilson added, "Except maybe an egghead like you."

It's actually a fair point, Johnny thought. *Who* would *give a hoot?*

"I might help you look for it," Wilson continued, "in return for a little favor."

Wilson's help was about as welcome to Johnny as a dose of castor oil. With his best sarcastic tone, Johnny said, "You

wanna be Scrooge?"

Wilson considered it. "Well . . ."

"Forget it." Johnny turned to go.

"Then put in a good word with Emmy for me," Wilson added quickly.

Johnny turned to face Wilson. "Emmy? So all that brave defender stuff with Lazlo the other day was what? Posturing to get her attention?" Then it dawned on him. "You put Lazlo up to it, didn't you?"

Wilson stepped back and swallowed hard. "No! I—just . . . don't like bullies, that's all!"

Johnny scoffed. "Hard to believe, coming from a guy who *is* one. Emmy's not gonna fall for your schmaltzy gestures, y'know.

"They're not schmaltzy! I just wanna get to know her. Help me out and I'll get your stuff back pronto."

Johnny grabbed him by the coat. "So you *do* have it! Give it back *now*!"

Wilson shoved Johnny's hands away. "Take yer meat hooks off me! I told you I didn't take anything. I just meant if you help me, I'll help you."

Something about the look on Wilson's face led Johnny to believe that, for once, he was being truthful. Johnny backed down. "No, thanks. I don't need your help. And Emmy certainly doesn't need you either." He walked away.

"Fine," Wilson called after him. "See if I help with Lazlo anymore!"

Johnny trudged home, Wilson's question still echoing in his thoughts. Who would give a hoot about his experiments? Only one person came to mind—someone he should have thought of sooner. That was where he'd go next.

If his parents didn't ground him for being out so late, that is.

This time, Harold actually argued against grounding him, while Fiona argued for it. And this time Harold prevailed.

Johnny wondered whether the spirits of his parents had swapped bodies. He reasoned that his father was as anxious to locate the cloth as Johnny himself was, while Fiona was still working out her grief.

Before bed, he told his father what he found out at the Mangle house and his idea of where to look next.

"Ben Huck," Johnny said.

Harold looked confused, a thing that didn't happen every day. "Why Ben?"

"He knew about the experiment I was doing. We thought it might help us build a powered wheelchair for Steve. Maybe he picked up the battery and cloth since it was there."

"Seems like a long shot, but I suppose every option is worth checking out."

Johnny nodded. "I'll talk to him on Monday."

Sunday morning, Johnny dutifully started to dress for church —until he realized the usual bustle of the Lord's Day was missing. He peered out his door just in time to see Harold emerge from his bedroom, still in his dressing gown and slippers.

Harold noticed him, too, and said, "We won't be going to church today. We'll read Scripture here at home instead." He made his way to the stairs and descended.

Johnny blinked. Things were getting stranger and stranger at the Whittaker house.

After breakfast, Harold brought out his Bible, and he and Johnny took turns reading passages aloud. Johnny read mainly from Psalms. It was all he could do to keep his mind on the task. But for Fiona's sake, he focused on reading well, and he noticed a look of what appeared to be bliss on her face as she absorbed the poetic words.

When they finished, Johnny retreated to his room. He pulled the script for *A Christmas Carol* from his book bag and started committing his lines to memory. His familiarity with the story helped a great deal, and by the time he came

downstairs for lunch, he'd memorized not only his own part but several other parts as well.

That afternoon Harold withdrew into his study, while Fiona and Charlie took a nap. Johnny washed the dishes. Afterward, he knocked on the door of the inner sanctum.

"Come in," Harold said.

Johnny entered to see his father reading a book. It looked old.

"Are you reading for fun or doing work?" Johnny asked.

"I find reading pleasurable regardless of the purpose," Harold said. "But to answer your question, I'm researching something."

"Is it about the cloth?"

Harold nodded. "It is. I haven't had the time or clarity of mind to dig much deeper since last we talked about it, but it's been on my mind a good deal." He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. Johnny couldn't recall seeing such deep sorrow in them before.

Harold motioned for Johnny to sit in the chair opposite his own, then unlocked the drawers, opened the bottommost one, and pulled from it two oversize books and a few folders, which he set on the desktop. Then, leaning forward, he folded his hands. The moment played out as if he were about to give an academic lecture.

"John, the historical trail of the cloth is remarkable. In fact, if someone told it to me, I wouldn't believe a word of it. And I'm not telling you that you have to believe the information I'm about to share with you. But I'm going to tell you everything I know, as I promised I would."

Johnny sat back and waited. Harold pulled a piece of paper out of the first file and handed it to Johnny. "I think you saw this paper in my office at the college already."

It was, indeed, the one Johnny had seen, with several phrases underlined or circled.

Harold continued, "There is a legend that I've been researching many years, primarily because of a conversation I had with Karl Mangle back when you were little. This legend began with a man named Father Lucian. When you gave me

the journal to have my contact overseas translate it, I saw that name on a few of the pages."

Johnny looked at the paper. He already knew about Lucian and Gamaliel since he snuck into his father's study that night that Charlie caught him. Of course, his father didn't know that—or did he? He had some crazy ability to know things intuitively. "And what about this other name?"

"Gamaliel. He and Lucian are tied together in a way. Back in the fifth century, Father Lucian had what must have been a vision. In his vision, Gamaliel instructed Lucian to retrieve some holy relics for protection. Among them, he specifically mentioned a cloak. Lucian found it hidden in a casket. The man inside the casket was Gamaliel's son Abibas. And here's one difficult piece to believe: the man had died over 350 years prior, but his body hadn't decayed at all. It was as if the man died only hours before."

"But how's that possible?" Johnny asked. "Everything that's dead decays."

"It does indeed. But *his* body hadn't." Harold shifted in his chair, his eyes locked on Johnny's. "Inside the cloak was a piece of papyrus with phrases scrawled on it—the same phrases as the ones you asked me to have Professor Mangle translate."

Johnny's brow furrowed. "So . . . you think that cloak . . . and the cloth . . ."

"Yes. I believe the cloth is part of the cloak."

The cloth seemed even more significant now. Johnny felt sick that it was gone.

His father seemed to know what he was thinking—again. "Many artifacts with as much or greater value have been lost over time—the Ark of the Covenant, Noah's ark, the cross of Christ. The Lord is more than able to safeguard those things. If He wants the cloth found, it'll be found."

"Dad . . . how do you suppose Grandpa got the cloak?"

Harold slid the information about Lucian back in his folder, set it down, and opened another folder, one Johnny hadn't seen before. "I'm not certain. There's a trail to follow, though large gaps of time pass when nothing is mentioned.

However—" he handed Johnny several pages—"this is one piece I *did* find. It's a manuscript from nearly a thousand years later, written by a group of monks cloistered away in a Middle Eastern monastery whose chief mission was to chronicle the history and advancement of Christianity."

Johnny swallowed. "I don't think I can read this."

Harold nodded reassuringly. "It's all right, son. I'm giving you permission."

"No, I mean I don't think I can *read* this. It's in Latin. I'm not sure I've learned enough yet."

Harold smiled. "Give it a try. If you get stuck, I'll help." He leaned back in his overstuffed leather chair. "I think you'll find it to be a rather exciting story," he added. "Right up an adventure-lover's alley."

Johnny eagerly began to read. Though the words on the page were in Latin, they appeared in his mind in English.

AD 1350, Jerusalem

Sir William, Sir Gawain, Sir Geoffroi, and Sir Richerd, knights of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher, crept down the narrow passageway. They had tried to stay out of this sector of Jerusalem of late, since the Black Plague had taken many these past months and it was no respecter of persons. It would slay a knight as readily as it had the Mamluk soldiers who ruled over the city or the Jewish Christians who had survived persecution. Now only a few of those believers remained, although the knights added to their saintly number.

They received word from an ally Mongol warrior that the crypt, which enclosed the most holy relics, had been compromised and Mamluk soldiers were already inside looking to desecrate, destroy, or plunder the sacred objects. Within minutes the Order had arrived, for it was their sworn duty to protect the relics at any cost, as they were the history—and the future—of the faith.

The others of their Order were out on patrol when

the news came. Sir William hoped they would arrive in time. The Mamluk soldiers always traveled in large packs. The knights would be outnumbered. But to tarry would mean the loss of untold treasures. If nothing else, their death would buy more time for their fellow chivalrous soldiers to arrive.

William alone knew the importance of this mission. For in the crypt was the most precious relic known to have survived the ages. The tale of the relic had been entrusted from guardian to guardian since the priest Lucian discovered it nearly a millennium before. Lucian had been visited in a vision by the prophet Gamaliel and told where to find the holy relics, including the cloak, which rendered the body of Abibas incorruptible. Upon discovering the cloak, the bishop who accompanied Lucian said that the cloak would go with him. But Lucian would not allow it, as Gamaliel had stated specifically that the cloak was entrusted solely to his care. Lucian held him off for three years, but the bishop was insistent. He eventually came to transport all the relics to Constantinople, where they would reside in the church of the holy deacon, Laurence.

But Lucian fooled the bishop, for he replaced the true cloak with another that resembled it. He then sequestered the true cloak to this crypt for safekeeping. It is said that when he did, rain returned to the drought-stricken region and saturated the land.

Now these noble knights were about to rain down on the invading Mamluks.

They arrived at the door leading into the crypt. A Mamluk soldier stood guard and William signaled to Sir Geoffroi to let fly an arrow.

He felled the man readily.

Within seconds they were in the crypt. But they were woefully undermanned, for nearly thirty Mamluk soldiers were inside. The only advantage proffered the knights was the element of surprise, for the Mamluks

were busy sorting through which relics they intended to loot before they destroyed the rest.

Sir William and the others leapt upon first one and then another, their swords in full action and wasting no motion. The room had little light, but the darkness was also the knights' ally. For by the time the Mamluks could gather themselves and react, they did so in panic, as they could see nothing but the flashes of swords and the bodies of their slain fellow soldiers littering the floor. In but a moment half of the Mamluk soldiers had been dispatched.

The remaining Mamluks rallied. Experts in close-quarter combat, they soon proved equal to the knights' challenge. The commander of the Mamluk garrison was a skilled swordsman by the name of Tunkuz, and Sir William recognized him instantly. Tunkuz was engaged at present with Sir Richerd, who was more than capable with a blade.

Shadows danced across the rock wall as the fight pressed on, like pictographs of an era long past. Sir William fought against two soldiers, his sword in one hand and his mace in the other. William had the advantage in skill and speed, but his greatest advantage was his wit. He feigned fatigue, pretending to falter. When the impatient soldiers saw an opening, they became too hasty. The man to William's left parried, then quickly thrust his sword to draw William's defense, while the other raised his sword to slash a fatal blow. William guessed at the plan. He leapt backwards while deflecting the first soldier's attack, then quickly advanced on the second, bringing the full force of his mace against the soldier's side. Once the man had fallen, he turned to the other and sprung with full force. He finished off the Mamluk easily.

William scanned the room. What he saw chilled him to the bone. Sir Richerd, who had been ably advancing against Tunkuz, made a fatal error. Richerd

thrust, but Tunkuz parried the blow, then deftly grabbed Richerd by the arm and swung him about—directly into the path of a slashing blade directed at Tunkuz. The blade cut deep into Sir Richerd's shoulder and neck. He instantly went limp and slumped to the ground.

At the other end of the sword stood Sir Geoffroi, horror-stricken that his sword was the tool that stole the life of his comrade.

Tunkuz took the advantage and moved to slay Sir Geoffroi as well. Sir William sprang into action.

Tunkuz jabbed at Geoffroi's hand, disarming him. Imagining an easy kill, he too made a fatal error, for he did not see the manic face of the man rushing toward him, nor the mace in the man's right hand. Tunkuz left his head defenseless, and that is where Sir William's mace lodged.

He somehow swung wildly back at William, who managed to dodge the massive blade, and in one swift move ram the tip of his sword through Tunkuz's chin.

There was nothing left for the soldier to do but die.

Still, the battle was not over. Seeing their leader fall doubled the Mamluk soldiers' resolve. When it seemed they might recover and defeat the three remaining knights, a loud uniform yell halted the action.

Flowing through the entrance were more than a dozen additional knights, led by Sir Edward of Woodstock. As only ten Mamluk soldiers remained, they were now woefully outnumbered.

Sir Edward spoke forcefully. "Lay down your swords and you shall live. Fight and you shall die."

The Mamluks, to a man, did not hesitate. All moved swiftly to attack. But they did not have a chance. They fell within minutes at the skilled hands of the knights of the Order of the Holy Sepulcher.

Sir Edward raised his blade to them. "They died with honor." The other knights raised their blades as

well. All except Sir William, who knelt beside Sir Richerd. Richerd's wound was mortal, though he had not yet succumbed. His eyes were dark, as if a curtain had been pulled over them. His breathing was shallow. He motioned for Sir William to come closer.

William gently gripped his comrade's hand. "Yes, my friend?"

"We are brothers, you and I—are we not?"

"The best of brothers."

"The best." Richerd's face turned paler by the second. "Is it safe? The sacred cloak?" he asked.

"I do not know," William answered.

Richerd's brow constricted in anger. "Then go find it, man! Waste not time with me!"

"If it is here, it will be here still. If it is gone or ruined, there is nothing more to be done. What is needful now is that I commit your soul to God." William began to pray.

Richerd stopped him. "My soul is ever God's. Do your duty. I must know the cloak's fate before I die that I may make account of it to the Lord when I see His face."

William reluctantly nodded, then rose and surveyed the site. It was a gruesome scene: bodies heaped upon one another, bloody pools of mud, the lives of men extinguished. In addition to Sir Richerd, two other knights had fallen: Sir James Grey and Sir Walter Armholt. Men he had fought beside for more than ten years. Men who left behind wives and children.

Scattered among the bodies were skulls and broken shards of bone. The Mamluk soldiers obviously had not intended to keep these sacred relics, instead tossing these holy articles aside as if they were worthless.

Other items were also strewn about, among them a wooden cross, scrolls, and a shattered clay pot with ashes about it. Fortunately, William knew something the heathen soldiers could not know. The cloak had

been secreted away in a cleft of the wall that could not readily be seen. He himself had placed it there. No other knight, save one, knew of its location. For like Lucian and the other guardians of the cloak before him, William had been given the direct command to protect the cloak at all costs. The only other who knew where it lay was Sir Gawain, and he had only been told in the event that William could not carry out his duty, due to death or betrayal.

Sir William looked about the crypt, making sure no eye followed him. He moved to the end of the room. The light did not reach the space, so no one could see what he was about. The cleft was not large enough for a hand to pass through, save for one portion up near the ceiling where the wall had fragmented. With no small effort, William pulled free a rock embedded there. Then he reached into the opening.

"'Tis not there," a voice behind him said.

William turned. Sir Edward stood before him, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword.

"Edward . . . what have you done?"

"Fear not. The robe is safe," he said. "In a place only I know of."

"How . . . when . . . ?"

"A week back. I relieved the guards on duty."

"But how did you know where it was hidden?"

"Gawain says much when he has drunk much."

"The robe is a sacred object, Edward. It is not for men to decide its fate or how it is used. You know that."

"What I know is that it is in my possession. What you need know is that it will not help you."

Before he could react, William saw the torchlight flash off of Edward's blade. The burning heat of the blade penetrated his armor and severed his lung.

William fell to the ground.

Sir Edward smiled cruelly. He whispered, "The cloak cannot save your life. Not anymore."

Sir William looked on him, his eyes open wide in astonishment.

Edward sheathed his sword. “I cannot have you telling anyone. This is the only way.”

Sir William’s eyes slowly closed, and the world became lost to him.

Edward turned and called out, “Quickly! Come! Sir William has fallen!”

In a moment, the troop of knights stood beside him.

Sir Geoffroi knelt next to the valiant warrior. “Sir William is sleeping with the saints,” he softly said.

“A noble knight, if e’er there was one,” Sir Edward added.

Sir Gawain bent his knee. “Almighty Lord, we ask Thee to take the soul of your servant Sir William Hawkwood into your bosom. Through Christ, our Lord.” All in the room added, “Amen.”

They dispersed to complete their task, remove the dead, and restore the sacred relics to their rightful places.

Sir Gawain stopped Sir Edward. “How did this happen? I saw him a moment ago. He was untouched.”

“I know not. Perhaps a Mamluk warrior gave his last to slay him.” Then Sir Edward of Woodstock walked off.

Sir Gawain Mac Illiuntaig placed his hand in the cleft where the cloak had been hidden.

It was not there.

Johnny looked up, a quizzical expression on his face. “I don’t understand. Who wrote this? The only person who would’ve known about Sir Edward’s treachery was Sir Edward. And Sir William, of course, but he was dead.”

Harold smiled. “Good observation. I had the same question. Which means that either this story is a legend, a complete fabrication, the ravings of a madman, or . . .”

“The truth.”

Harold nodded. “Possibly. We can’t know which, at least not yet. We don’t have the rest of the account.”

“Do you have any leads?” Johnny asked.

“My friend overseas may. Hopefully he’ll complete the translation of your grandfather’s journal soon. We should know more then.”

Johnny gazed off pensively. Harold watched him for a moment and smiled. “You look just like I imagine I do when I’m thinking. What’s on your mind?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s not true,” his father said. “You know what’s bothering you. What is it?”

“I just wondered . . . is there anything else in your files that you haven’t shown me yet?”

Harold pursed his lips, looked upward in thought, and said, “No. Don’t think so.”

Johnny looked past his father to the credenza behind him. Harold had just lied to him. Johnny knew what his father had said couldn’t be true. He remembered the pages he saw hidden in the family Bible, the ones Harold had taken out of that Bible before giving it to him to do research on his granduncle G. W. McClintock. The pages chronicled something that had happened to Johnny when he was a toddler—something for which his father confessed to leaving him and his mother, Janneth. Those pages were sitting in the bottom drawer of the credenza right now.

A wave of resentment welled up inside Johnny so powerful he almost called out his father’s falsehood. But just then a muffled peal of laughter from Charlie and Fiona made its way into the study. The sound was startling and caused both Johnny and his father to look in that direction. There had been such a vacuum of laughter in the house the past week that hearing it now seemed . . . unnatural.

With great effort, Johnny suppressed the urge to call out his father. *Don’t rock the boat*, he thought. More laughter and giggles. An unconscious smile formed on Johnny’s face. He took a deep breath and turned back to Harold, who was also smiling. As if on cue, they both rose and headed upstairs

toward the sound.

It was coming from the grownups' bedroom. Father and son stopped at the doorway. Mother and daughter were on the bed playing pat-a-cake—or trying to. Fiona held up her hands for Charlie to pat, but when the girl tried, Fiona moved her hands around so Charlie missed. Each time it happened, Charlie found it hilarious. And of course, when Charlie held up her hands, Fiona couldn't see where to pat them, so she missed too, which Charlie also found hilarious. The child's laughter was infectious—each shriek of laughter was met by Fiona's musical chortles.

Harold also started chuckling and joined them in their game. Johnny stayed at the door, smiling, watching the scene in wonder. He had never heard anything sweeter, and yet, he marveled that it could be brought on by something so silly and in the face of such tragedy. It was also not lost on him that he had no memory of his father ever playing with him the way he now played with his stepdaughter.

At that moment, he realized what *bittersweet* actually meant.

Chapter Eight

When the sun rose on Monday, Johnny's spirits rose with it. His eyes gleamed with the anticipation of school. Gaining knowledge had always elicited that emotion within him. There was so much to know that it seemed one lifetime couldn't possibly be enough to discover it all. On top of that, of course, Johnny was eager to talk to Ben about the battery and the cloth. If Ben hadn't taken them . . . well, he'd cross that bridge if he came to it.

After breakfast, he met up with Emmy and raced her to school. Johnny considered himself fast, but she was faster, and trounced him easily. They arrived twenty minutes before class. Plenty of time to connect with Ben.

They made a dash to the custodial room, but it was empty. That seemed odd—Ben was always the first one at school. In fact, he opened up the building.

They went to the cafeteria and were met by Mrs. Wagner.

"Mr. Whittaker, Miss Capello. I hope you have your lines memorized."

"Yes, ma'am." Johnny said. "Do you know where Ben is?"

"He's not down in his work room," Emmy explained.

Mrs. Wagner nodded. "Mr. Huck called this morning. He has a family emergency he needs to attend to and won't be

joining us for the next few days."

"Emergency?" Emmy exclaimed.

"Did he say what it was?" Johnny asked.

"No, he just said that he wouldn't be back until Wednesday, and that he left instructions on the workbench about how to complete the electrical projects for the show. He trusts you to work unsupervised, so please don't let him down —nor the rest of us. Off you go."

Johnny and Emmy returned to the custodial room. Sure enough, the detailed directions for the remaining electrical work were waiting for them, along with a note telling them not to worry.

"You think it's his mother?" asked Emmy.

"More likely his father," Johnny replied. "I guess we'll find out on Wednesday. Meanwhile, we should do like Mrs. Wagner said and not let Ben down."

"Right." Emmy nodded. "Let's get to work."

They did. But while their hands were hard at work, their thoughts remained on their friend.

Rehearsal that afternoon went very well. They practiced the scenes when the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge back to the time he was engaged to Belle—played by Emmy. As they repeated the scene over and over, Emmy got more and more into the role, matching the emotion Johnny brought to his part. Mrs. Wagner asked them to do the scenes one last time and, before they started, whispered something in Emmy's ear. Emmy appeared to consider the direction carefully. After a few seconds she nodded and returned offstage to await her entrance.

It was the farewell scene, where young Scrooge and Belle dissolve their betrothal. Everything played out just as it had before, but at the end of the scene this time, Emmy crossed over to Johnny, took his hand, kissed him on the cheek, and then dashed offstage.

The room went dead silent. Johnny's mouth dropped open

and his eyebrows rose almost into his hairline. He reached up and touched his face where the kiss had been planted.

Suddenly, the room erupted with cheers, whistles, applause, and laughter. Johnny turned beet red.

Emmy came up to him from the wings with a satisfied smirk and whispered, "You're not the only one who can act." She then turned to the audience and curtsied. The cheers and applause increased.

Mrs. Wagner smiled from ear to ear. "That's *exactly* the reaction I want you to have, Mr. Whittaker! Well done, Miss Capello!"

Johnny also acknowledged the raucous students. Everyone looked quite entertained—except for one person.

Wilson. He looked like he wanted to pulverize Johnny. Which, Johnny thought, actually made the surprise and embarrassment of the kiss completely worth it.

The silence on the walk home was awkward to say the least. Johnny didn't know how to feel, which was made all the more troublesome by the fact that Emmy seemed rather nonchalant about the whole thing. As they approached their homes, she bid him a cheery "See ya tomorrow!" and, without waiting for an answer, ran to her front porch, bounded up the steps, and went inside.

Johnny couldn't *wait* for Ben to get back.

On the walk to school the next morning, Emmy chattered about everything: Twinkies, the Loch Ness Monster, swing music, Shirley Temple, you name it. Johnny listened in silence. He told himself that it was because he was concerned about Ben, but if he was truthful it was because he was still stupefied by Emmy's stage kiss.

As they walked past Town Hall, Emmy was midsentence talking about how spoiled her sister, Henny, was when she stopped and pointed, "Look! It's Al!"

Sure enough, on the sidewalk catty-corner across Smith Street, Al stood, looking toward the shops on East Main.

Actually, he was more than looking, Johnny thought. He seemed to be studying them. Before he could say anything, Emmy altered course and headed for Al like a bullet. Johnny frowned but followed.

"Hi, Al!" she said brightly.

"Miss Emmy," he said, touching the brim of his fedora in greeting. "And young Johnny! How's the shiner, champ?"

"Fine, thanks," Johnny replied curtly. He increasingly didn't like this guy—there was something about him he didn't trust.

"You gonna come and see our Christmas play?" Emmy asked.

"Well, now, I don't know," Al teased. "Is it gonna be good?"

"Absolutely! *Really* good!"

"I'm used to a pretty high caliber show," Al said with mock seriousness.

"Oh, you'll get it!" Emmy gushed. "Johnny's the lead and he's fantastic!"

"And Emmy's great too," Johnny added. "Very . . . real."

Emmy shot him a sideways glance.

Al nodded. "Okay, then. I guess I have no choice. I wouldn't miss it!" He smiled and winked at Emmy, and she flushed. Johnny rolled his eyes. *I may vomit*, he thought.

Al's smile turned into a knowing smirk. "Well, I need to be off. Got places to go and people to see." He touched his hat brim again. "See you two in the funny papers!" He turned and strolled off down Main.

"Bye!" Emmy called effusively.

Johnny grimaced and headed down Smith Street.

Emmy trotted to catch up with him. "What's with you?"

Johnny shrugged. "Nothin'. . . just that . . ."

"Just that what?"

"That guy gives me the creeps, is all."

"Al?" Emmy looked surprised. "Why? I'd have thought you'd be a little more grateful to him for saving your life."

Johnny scoffed. "You're overstating it a bit. Lazlo just got the drop on me. I would've taken him eventually."

Emmy suppressed a grin. “Mm-hmm.”

“I *would’ve*!”

Emmy nodded. “Whatever you say . . . champ.” She giggled and took off running.

“Very funny. And *I* didn’t say so—*you* did!” Johnny called after her. “Girls,” he growled.

Wednesday came at last and, true to his word and much to Johnny’s relief, Ben was back. Now Johnny could not only find out where Ben had been, but also finally ask him about the battery and the cloth—if he could figure out a way to do it without arousing suspicion.

Johnny and Emmy had barely entered the custodial room when they began plying him with questions:

“Where were you?”

“What happened?”

Ben held up his hands for them to stop. “Nice to know I’s missed!” he said with a toothy smile—which almost instantly turned into a scowl. “I told you two not to worry!”

“But Mrs. Wagner said it was a family emergency!” Emmy exclaimed. “Is it your mother?”

“It was actually Daddy, if ya must know.”

Johnny shot Emmy a knowing glance. Emmy wrinkled her nose at him.

Ben continued. “He got hisself into a bit of trouble over Burlington way. But it’s all been taken care of. He’s fine, nobody’s sick, and all’s good.” He tilted his head toward the workbench where they had been hard at work. “You both did fine while I was away. I picked up the rest of the supplies we need so’s we can finish up. What say we git to work?”

“Yes, sir!” Johnny and Emmy said in unison, and they all burst into laughter.

Johnny was exhilarated. He had wondered how he would broach the subject of the cloth, and Ben had just handed him the perfect in. “Speaking of supplies, I went by the water tower the other day to pick up the battery I used in my

experiment, but it was gone."

Ben slapped his thigh. "Oh! I meant to tell you. I swung by to pick it up fo' ya las' week. I figured you wouldn't have time, what with things being what they are in your home and all."

Johnny felt a surge of adrenaline. He could barely stay in his chair, but as casually as possible, said, "Thanks! How's it look?"

Ben shook his head. "I brought it back here to test it, but it was dead again. Core's cracked. Musta been from the lightning strike. It's very volatile."

Emmy stopped what she was doing. "Wait—'volatile,' as in it could've *exploded*?"

Ben nodded. "Oh yeah. Hope you two was a fair distance away when the bolt hit."

"Is four feet a fair distance?" Emmy asked indignantly.

Ben frowned. "Not hardly."

"So the acid could've burned us? Unbelievable!" Emmy turned to Johnny and glowered. "You better hope my dad never finds out."

Johnny smiled sheepishly, and she resumed her work in a huff. "Where's the battery now?" he asked Ben.

"Out to my place. I didn't want it 'round here. Ain't safe. One spark would likely set it off."

"Did you . . . find anything else out there?" Johnny asked.

Ben shook his head as he continued to work. "Nope," he said absentmindedly. "Can't say as I did."

Johnny's heart sank.

Ben twitched his neck, eliciting a series of cracks, then added, "I mean, some rags and such, but nothing else."

Johnny's heart leapt right back up again. "Rags?"

"You leave those there?" Ben asked.

"Uh, yeah—well, there was one piece of cloth I had," Johnny said. "It was pretty big. I thought I brought it home, but I suppose I might have left it."

"Yeah, I recall wrappin' the battery up in somethin' like that to transport it here."

"Is it at your place too . . . with the battery and wires?"

“Naw,” Ben said. “It was filthy so I tossed it in the cleaning bin here at the school. It’s important to you?”

Another surge of adrenaline. “Sort of. I mean, it belonged to my Grandpa Jackson. Where’s the bin? I’ll go get it.”

“It’s emptied every Saturday. A woman comes by and sifts through it to decide what to clean and what to . . . well, burn.”

Burn! Johnny’s adrenaline turned to alarm. “Is it possible she didn’t pick it up yet?”

Ben stood. “I suppose it’s possible, but she’s pretty prompt.”

Johnny moved restlessly on his stool.

Ben smiled curiously and said, “I can see we ain’t gon’ get nuthin’ done ’til we go look fo’ that rag . . .” He sighed. “C’mon. The bin’s out back.”

The three braved the cold and went outside to look. When Ben opened the container . . .

“Empty,” Johnny said. At that moment he felt every ounce of joy pouring out of his soul.

Ben lowered the lid. “Sorry about that. If I’da known, I would’ve held on to it for ya.”

“Wait,” Johnny said. “Maybe she didn’t burn it. Maybe she just cleaned it.”

“I wouldn’ta. It was a right mess,” Ben cautioned.

“It’s worth asking. Do you know who the cleaning woman is?” Johnny asked.

Ben scratched at his grey-flecked whiskers. “I believe her name is Annie—no . . . Arrie. That’s it.”

Johnny’s eyes widened. “The waitress at Hoops Diner?”

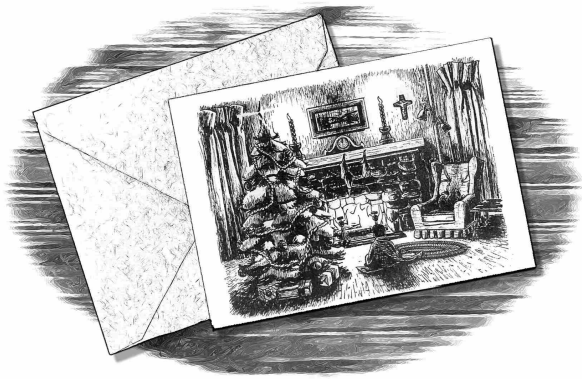
“Yeah, that’s the one. You know her?”

“She dropped off some food for us a few days ago.”

“She seems nice enough,” Ben said, rubbing his hands together. “Now we best get back to work. My bones don’t much care for this cold weather.”

On the way back in, Emmy said, “If you’re going to Hoops after school, I’ll come along. You can get your grandpa’s cloth, and I can get a chocolate soda!”

Chapter Nine



No sooner had school been dismissed than Johnny and Emmy darted out of the building for Hoops Diner. Johnny walked briskly, saying nothing. He was sorting through the options of what he might find out about the cloth. He dismissed the ones with dire conclusions, and he feared that the positive ones wouldn't come true.

"I've never seen you so eager to leave school before," Emmy said.

"Oh . . . you know . . . That pill Lazlo glowered at me all day long. I just got one black eye healed up. I decided to scram before he could try giving me another one."

Emmy frowned. "I thought boys considered black eyes a badge of honor."

"And I thought girls were supposed to moon over boys who were hurt."

"Not hardly," she smirked.

A few minutes later, they entered Hoops Diner. The door opened with the tinkle of a shopkeeper's bell. Behind the long, sit-down counter, Thomas, the owner, waved at them as he finished an order. They walked down the length of the narrow building and sat in a booth at the end.

One of the few diners in North Carolina, Hoops had

opened just before the Depression hit. It was an instant success. A wealthy family with a distrust of banks started the venture, and because they offered affordable meals, Hoops survived while other restaurants shut their doors. The last few months business had even increased, so much so they needed to hire on a few extra people.

Johnny's neck craned in every direction. At one point it raised up like a periscope as he peered over a few customers.

"Do you see her here?" Emmy asked.

"Not yet," Johnny said, still looking. "Maybe she's back in the kitchen." He plucked a menu from behind the ketchup bottle and looked it over while he waited.

"So . . . ," Emmy began gingerly, "what's the big deal with this cloth? I mean . . . I know it was your grandpa's, but . . . I've seen your trunk. You have a lot of stuff in it. What makes an old piece of cloth so special?"

Johnny would've loved to tell Emmy the whole story, but his father had instructed him to keep quiet. And it made sense. The more people who knew about the cloth and what it could do, the greater the chance it could fall into the wrong hands. Though right now, he hoped Arrie still had it in *her* hands. If it had been burned as rubbish, its secret and history would be lost forever.

"I think I'll have an RC Cola," he replied. "You?"

"I'd like . . . an answer. And then a chocolate soda."

Johnny evaded. "It's a family heirloom. Why wouldn't it be important to me?" He needed a change of subject, and suddenly thought of one. "Oh! By the way, I saw Steve a few days ago. Did you know he could draw? I mean, really well."

"No, I didn't."

"He's sketching some nifty-looking Christmas cards. He wants to sell them to help pay for some of his medical bills. I told him I'd hawk as many as I could. You wanna help?"

"Sure! But how?"

"We can go door to door. Once people see the cards and know they're for a good cause, they should sell easily."

"Maybe," she said, chewing on her lip. "But I wonder if . . ." Her eyes darted back and forth as if watching some

unseen event; then her face lit up and she bounced forward on the red seat. “I have a great idea! We sell the cards at the school play! Tiny Tim is kinda like Steve. Even the Scrooges in the audience will want to help out, I bet!”

Johnny smiled. “But will Principal Ambrose let us? The fund-raiser’s for the school, not Steve.”

Emmy bounced in her seat again. “But maybe it *should* be! I mean, I know the school needs the money, but Steve needs it more, right? Look, my dad and Principal Ambrose are old friends. You take care of the cards; I’ll take care of the principal.”

“Deal,” Johnny agreed.

A voice from the booth opposite them said, “Sounds like you two are on a mission.” It was Al.

Emmy beamed at him. “Oh, hi! We didn’t see you.”

“I like to blend in,” he said. He nodded at Johnny. “Hi, champ. Say, that eye looks great now! For a while there you coulda doubled for Lon Chaney in *Phantom of the Opera.*”

“You wanna join us?” Emmy said quickly.

Johnny reasoned if Al joined them Emmy would be distracted from asking about the cloth. So despite his mistrust of the guy, he said as pleasantly as he could, “Yeah, please do!”

“Sure!” Al slid out of his booth and plopped next to Johnny. He nudged him. “So . . . I know Emmy said you two weren’t an item, but what do *you* say?”

“I don’t have time for a girl in my life,” Johnny said. It was a line he heard in a movie once and always wanted to try it out.

“Well, *I’m* a girl,” Emmy reminded him—as if he needed it. “You seem to have time for me.”

He could see she was vexed. When her chin tucked in and her eyes narrowed, it was a surefire giveaway. The sarcasm in her tone was a solid clue as well. “Of course I do,” he clarified. “But as a friend, like you said.”

Good save, he thought.

Al suppressed a smug grin, the kind adults show when they think kids are “so cute.” He said, “Well, maybe you two

‘friends’ could help me with something.”

“How could *we* help *you*?” Emmy asked.

“I’m looking for a good, healthy bank where my aunt can keep her money. Someplace safe. She lost a lot when the banks crashed and is just now digging out. Wants to make sure she doesn’t lose it all again.” He smiled innocently.

Johnny tucked the menu back behind the ketchup. “There’s only one in town, Barrymore Banking and Trust.”

“But I’m sure it’s safe,” Emmy volunteered.

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Johnny and I found some Confederate gold, and that’s where it’s being kept.” The words shot out of her mouth before Johnny could stifle her. Why he felt the need to do so, he couldn’t say. But since the moment he met Al he had a nagging feeling that the man wasn’t who he said he was. Maybe it was the scar on his forehead that unnerved Johnny. Or that he had just asked two kids about which bank to use. Whatever it was, Johnny felt sure he’d assessed Al correctly when the man didn’t even bat an eye at Emmy’s mention of the gold. It was as if he’d already known about it.

“Gold, eh?” Al said. “You two treasure hunters?”

“More like detectives,” Emmy volunteered. “Johnny’s the brain. He’s a regular Sherlock Holmes. I call him that sometimes—Sherlock.”

“You *used* to,” Johnny pointed out. He shot a look at Al. “I don’t much like the name.”

Al chuckled amiably. “How do you know the gold’s still there? In the bank, I mean. They mighta moved it by now.”

“I saw Mr. Underwood last week—he’s the bank manager,” Emmy said. “He told me it’s locked up tight. He said the vault’s the safest place for it.”

Al leaned in. “And why is that?”

At that moment, Arrie walked up and asked, “What’ll it be?” Then, seeing Johnny, she added, “Oh, you’re that Whittaker boy, ain’tcha?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you for the food. It was really good—at least the stuff that didn’t end up on the floor.”

“I’m glad. How’s your ma? Any better?”

“Actually, she’s doing much better.” *Weirdly enough,* he thought, and then added, “Thanks for asking.”

Arrie laid her calloused hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “Keep yer head up. The sun don’t go down but that it comes back up agin soon enough. Now—” she pulled her order booklet from her apron pocket—“name your poison.”

Johnny and Emmy put in their order. Arrie asked Al if he wanted anything else. “Nope, need to go,” he responded, and as quickly as he said it, he stood up, nodded at Johnny, winked at Emmy, and left the diner without even a backward glance.

“Here’s your hat. What’s your hurry?” Arrie called after him.

Johnny glanced at Emmy. He needed to ask Arrie about the cloth, though he knew it meant Emmy would probably start asking questions again. It couldn’t be helped. He took a breath. “Mrs. Arrie—I’m sorry, I don’t know your last name . . .”

“Beard. It’s an awful last name and I shy away from it. I just go by Miss Arrie. Not married . . . anymore. My husband died, rest his soul.”

“I’m sorry,” Johnny said.

“So’m I. All he left me was that last name.”

“Miss Arrie,” Emmy interjected, “Mr. Huck at school said you take care of sorting through their cleaning bin.”

“Sure do,” said Arrie. “I clean what can be and burn the remainder. No rest for the weary. The money helps out my folks back home in Missourah. Why?”

“An old family heirloom got put in there by mistake,” Johnny said.

Arrie tousled her black hair. “Oh dear, I hope not. What’s it look like?”

“It’s . . . well, pretty plain looking. No particular markings. It’s old, really old. And kinda long. And . . . white?” He wasn’t used to describing cloth.

“I know that cloth. Everything else in the bin was pretty small, but that one was big enough to cover a table. And it looked like something my mama woulda weaved.”

"You didn't burn it, did you?" Johnny asked abruptly.

Arrie gave Johnny a wink and a smile. "I didn't. Haven't even washed it yet."

Dizzy with excitement, Johnny asked, "Is it here? Can I have it now?"

Arrie chuckled. "'Fraid I'm not in the habit of bringin' laundry to the diner. But you can pick it up at my house."

"Great! When do you get off work?"

"Oh, it can't be today, honey. I'm workin' late and leavin' town right after. Got m'bag packed and waitin' in the back."

Johnny's joy deflated. "Leaving? How long will you be gone?"

Arrie grimaced. "'Til next Wednesday."

"A whole *week*?"

She nodded. "'Fraid so. Unavoidable." She patted Johnny's hand. "Don't worry, hon. Yer cloth won't walk off."

It did a few days ago, he thought.

Arrie wrote directions to her house on her notepad, tore off the page, and handed it to him. "Here ya go. You come by my place after school next Wednesday and I'll have it all ready fer ya." Then she shoved her pad into her pocket. "One chocolate soda and one RC Cola comin' up." She shuffled away.

Emmy smiled at Johnny. "That should make you happy."

"Yeah, I'd have hated to lose it." Johnny tried playing it cool. He was ecstatic at the promise of getting it back, even though it would be a week of torturous waiting.

They listened for a minute to Bing Crosby singing "Silent Night" from the radio behind the counter. At least Johnny listened to it. Emmy seemed to wander off in thought. Once the song ended, Johnny said, "Bing is the best."

"Why do you suppose Al ran off like that?" Emmy asked.

"I don't know. I really don't trust him, though."

"What do you mean you don't trust him?" she said with more than a hint of frost.

"Oh, come on, Emmy, think about it! A guy nobody knows with a mysterious relative he won't name comes to town, and the first thing he asks us about is a bank? And then when you

tell him the gold is there, the only reaction he has is to say it may have been moved 'by now.' Why would he say all that? The only reason I can think of is because he already knew how long it had been there!"

Emmy's frosty demeanor turned glacial. "Oh, brother. And how would he even know about the gold until I told him?"

Now it was Johnny's turn to be annoyed. "Every newspaper on the eastern seaboard picked up that story. He'd have to have been living in a cave to *not* hear about it."

Emmy heaved a long sigh and snatched a napkin out of the dispenser. "You see a mystery lurking in every corner, don't you?"

"No, but I do keep my eyes open," Johnny answered, a bit too defensively. "You should try it sometime."

"Well that's a fine thing to say!" she shrieked. Several customers craned their necks to look at them.

Johnny noticed but didn't care. "Why are you being such a . . . a . . . a *girl*?"

Emmy's olive complexion turned maroon, which perplexed Johnny since he always thought of olives as being green, and everyone knows that green and red make yellow. His mental diversion was interrupted when Emmy huffed loudly, tossed her napkin on the table, and stormed out of the diner.

As much as he liked her, Johnny knew at that moment that there were times he didn't understand Emmy at all. One thing was certain: she wouldn't practice that stage kiss again anytime soon.

Arrie walked up and set two drinks in front of him. "One chocolate soda, one RC Cola. Somethin' tells me you'll be drinkin' both."

"You heard that, huh?"

"Everyone on the block heard that," Arrie said.

Johnny slurped a huge gulp of the soda, still wondering how things went off the rails so quickly.

"Want some pie, hon? Pie makes everything better."

"No thanks," Johnny answered, though pie did sound good.

“Mind me askin’ what that argument was about? Had me a daughter once. I might be able to shed a little light on things for ya.”

“Once?” Johnny asked. “Did something happen to her?”

“Cholera. Terrible disease. She was just startin’ her life out. T’aint right.”

“I’m sorry. I have a friend who’s really sick too. We’re doing a school play as a fund-raiser for his medical bills. And selling Christmas cards he drew.”

“Put me down for a dozen. And tickets to your play. When is it?”

“The evening of the twenty-second. I’m pretty sure the whole town will show up for it.”

“I expect so. I ain’t been here long, but this seems like a community of caring folks. I’ll be thinking of your friend. What’s his name?”

“Steve Mangle. He has muscular dystrophy.”

“I’ve heard about that. Nasty, awful disease. A child shouldn’t have to go through such things,” she said, her eyes tinged with sorrow. “I’ll do my part to get word out about the play. Won’t be hard in a town as small as Provenance. Now . . . what were you and the young lady quarrelin’ about?”

“I have no idea,” Johnny said, his face resting in his hands. “We started talking about the guy who was sitting with us. I told her he seemed kinda shady to me, and before I knew it she got angry and left.”

Arrie sat opposite Johnny in the booth. “If it helps, I’m with you. That fella’s a real nogoodnik,” she said.

“You know Al?”

“Al? That ain’t what I heard him call himself.”

“What? When?”

“Not an hour ago. He was sittin’ over there chattin’ it up with some gent in spiffy duds, talkin’ some folderol about a case of somethin’.”

Johnny sat up straight, his detective antenna on high alert. “Did he maybe say he was ‘casing’ something, like checking it out? Like, the bank? There’s been talk of gangs

robbing banks in these small towns."

Arrie looked surprised. "Has there? Maybe I should get my money out, though I'm not sure where I could keep it if I did." Then she cocked her head and said, "Y'know, it seems like I did hear them talking about the bank. Not that I eavesdrop, mind you. You hear plenty of things on this job, but I try to keep my nose out of other folks' business. Still . . . there's something fishy about that guy."

Johnny rewound the conversation a little way in his mind. "You said Al was going by another name?"

Arrie thought for a few seconds. "Yeah . . . Sam or Ham? I can't say for sure."

The door jingled, and an elderly man and his wife entered. "Grab a seat anywhere," Arrie called out. "Be right with ya!" She stood up and straightened her apron. "Now you go make things right with your girlfriend. She's a sweet thing."

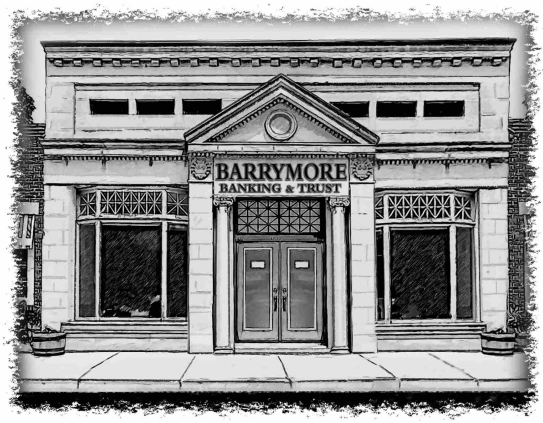
Johnny's eyebrows converged. "She's not my—"

"Not your girlfriend, right. Listen, maybe you feel that way, but one thing's for certain—*she* don't. It's as easy as pie to see. Speaking of which, let me know if you change your mind."

Johnny took a deep breath. *Good grief, Emmy wants to be my girlfriend?* He planted his elbows on the tabletop and propped up his head in his hands. *One* more *thing to think about . . . Emmy, Al, the gold, the bank, the play, Lazlo, Steve, Paul, the mysterious boy, Fiona, the cloth . . .*

"Miss Arrie," he called out. "I think I will have some pie after all."

Chapter Ten



Johnny left the diner a half-hour later, his stomach full of pie, cola, and soda and his mind full of complex thoughts. If only life consisted of math problems or scientific formulas—he knew how to solve those. Relationships were a lot harder. He had, however, settled on one course of action: to fix his mind resolutely on getting the cloth back and give Fiona the best Christmas present ever.

His resolve lasted almost a full minute.

It was snowing. Again. He turned his face skyward and let the icy flakes dust his face. He closed his eyes and stuck out his tongue for the flakes to land on . . . and then heard a sharp *tsk!* He slowly opened one eye and then the other.

Standing in front of him was an elderly woman, her puglike brow wrinkled up in layers. He quickly retracted his tongue, nodded to her, and said, “Hello.”

She glared at him, snorted, and continued on, shaking her head and muttering about “young people these days.”

Johnny sighed. At times he felt like a misfit; the only plaid in a world full of polka dots. But then again, maybe that wasn’t so bad. He glanced back at the old woman, stifled a chuckle, and headed down the sidewalk.

At the corner, he jaywalked across Main Street. He passed

several businesses, including Howard's Barbershop and the Five & Dime. When he saw the light in the bank, he stopped. After hearing the curious things Arrie said about Al, he decided the bank should be told.

Johnny went inside. Mr. Underwood, the bank manager, looked up from his desk behind the counter, a Kaywoodie Chesterfield pipe hanging from his teeth. The scent of cherry tobacco wafted through the room.

"Well, good day, young man!" Underwood set the pipe on a wooden tray atop his desk. "And how's our young celebrity doing this afternoon?"

"Fine, sir, thank you. May I ask you a few questions?"

Underwood smiled winsomely. "I'm not in trouble, am I? A detective such as yourself can come across as somewhat intimidating."

Johnny returned the smile as he made his way through the gate in the counter. "No, sir. I just was wondering . . ."

Mr. Underwood leaned forward, his hands folded as if in prayer. "Have a seat," he said, more as a directive than a suggestion.

Johnny pulled out the wooden chair and sat in it. "Thank you."

"Now, what can I answer for you?" he said intently, but with a patina of amusement, as if he were entertained by Johnny's request.

"Sir, have you come across a man—he's new in town—by the name of Al?"

Johnny could see Underwood mentally sort through the catalog of faces he had encountered that week. His eyes darted left and right as if the images scrolled across his vision. Soon, a light of recognition appeared on his face. "Tall, slender fellow, dark hair salted with grey, sporting a moustache like a hairy caterpillar?"

"That's him. Shady-looking."

Underwood grinned. "I thought he was rather dashing myself. And cordial." He cocked his bald head. "You don't like the man?"

"No—I mean, it's not that I don't like him, I just thought

he . . . you know . . .”

“Looked shady.”

“Yeah.”

“Why do you ask about this ‘shady’ character? Is *he* in trouble?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m suspicious of new people coming to town right after we discover a lot of gold. Plus he was overheard talking to another man about the bank. Something about casing it.”

Mr. Underwood harrumphed, nodded, picked up his pipe, leaned back in his chair, and puffed intently. “I don’t think there’s much to worry about, my boy. Our bank here is . . . very secure.”

“But did he ask you anything about the bank? Maybe about its security?”

Mr. Underwood puffed harder. “I know it sets a young boy’s mind in motion—bank robberies and whatnot. And your mind’s a keen one, no doubt. But here’s the thing: Bonnie and Clyde and their kind are a thing of the past. A few renegades are still on the prowl, to be sure, but J. Edgar Hoover and his sort are rounding them up. It’s just a matter of time before every one of these hooligans is finished. So put your mind at ease, young man. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worried, sir. I just think it’s smart to get ahead of trouble if you can.”

Underwood smiled appreciatively. “You may be right. Though in my army days I learned an important truth: if you get too far ahead of your company, your own men may mistake you for the enemy.”

Johnny considered the axiom and then said, “I suppose, but I think they’ll figure it out if you’re all shooting in the same direction.”

“Fair enough.” Underwood drew on his pipe again and exhaled a cloud of smoke that wafted around his head. “Though I’m not sure what more we can do here, security-wise.”

Johnny had a sudden brainstorm. “How about an alarm?” he said eagerly. “Something that would go off if a robber did

try to break in?"

Underwood removed his pipe from his mouth thoughtfully. "Interesting . . ."

"And I know where you can get one, right here in Provenance! From the school!"

Underwood looked confused.

Johnny plowed on. "Not the school, exactly, but someone *in* the school! Ben Huck!"

Underwood blinked. "The janitor?"

"Yes, he's a brilliant inventor! He's already made the system, and it works like a charm! He created it as a fire alarm, but he could easily adapt it for the bank. He could even make it so that if a robbery occurs, it would alert the sheriff's station!" *Provenance* does *have one of those!* he thought.

"Really?" Underwood contemplated the possibility. "Could he rig it with a panic button under my desk like those fancy town banks have?"

"He could rig a button under every teller window, if you want!"

Underwood slapped his hand on the table and pointed his pipe at Johnny. "This is very impressive! I'll tell you what, young Whittaker, you have Huck bring in his system and demonstrate it for me. If it works like you say, and the price is right, I'll buy it from him! Deal?" He stood and held out his hand.

Johnny also stood and took it. "Deal!" They shook.

Underwood returned his pipe to his teeth. "You're quite the savant, I must say!" he said with a puff and a grin. "I'd better watch out for you or you'll have my job someday."

"Nah, I'd like to do something more exciting than this."

Mr. Underwood smiled and said, "Can't say as I blame you, my boy. There are days when I feel the same way myself."

Chapter Eleven

Johnny awoke with a start. His internal clock told him he had overslept.

His internal clock was right. He heard the chime of the mantel clock in the living room downstairs. He was a full half hour behind schedule. He jumped out of bed as if it were on fire.

It had been a short night, thinking about Al—or Sam, or whatever his name was—and the plans he might have to rob the bank. Would it be a big gang wearing kerchief masks or an overnight theft while the town slept? His imagination scoured every possibility.

After scarfing down his breakfast, Johnny patted McDuff, ignored Charlie, and kissed Fiona. Then, grabbing his knapsack and lunch pail, he bolted out the door into the cold winter morning.

He jogged over to Emmy's house, half expecting her to be outside already. As there was no sign of her, he stood on the sidewalk waiting.

He rehearsed his apology to her for the argument they'd had at the diner, all the while wishing she'd hurry so they wouldn't be tardy for class. After a few minutes, he went up to the door and knocked. Mrs. Capello answered.

"*Buongiorno*, Johnny!" she said cheerfully. Mrs. Capello was known about town as a person who broadcast waves of smiles in every sea of frowns.

"Morning, Mrs. C. Is Emmy ready for school?"

"Oh, I'ma sorry. She left early." Her eyebrows danced expressively as she spoke. "I know that's unusual for her, but she seemed pretty excited. And I'ma notta one to curb my *bambina's* enthusiasm for learning."

"Right. Well . . . thanks."

"*Prego!* You're welcome. Please, give-a my love to your *mamma*!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Even the door sounded cheerful when she closed it.

Johnny made his way toward school. He pondered why Emmy would leave early. His first thought was that she did it to avoid him after their quarrel, but he decided not to assume the worst. That thought soon changed, though.

Standing in almost the exact spot of his eye-blackening wallop from Lazlo were Emmy and Al. They seemed to be engaged in a deep conversation. Emmy's hands gesticulated wildly, which she only did when she described things. That she did it now concerned Johnny. *Was he pumping her for more information about the bank?* At one point Emmy laughed like a silly schoolgirl. Of course, she *was* a schoolgirl, but he'd never thought of her as a silly one.

Johnny thought back to something he read in a detective novel: *A person's attributes typify the true person within.* Johnny studied Al's attributes. In addition to his eyes being too close together, his teeth were crooked and his moustache was even more crooked. How could you trust a guy like that?

Johnny started toward them. No sooner had he done so than Al turned and sauntered off. Emmy stooped to pick up her bag and glanced Johnny's way. When she saw him, her demeanor instantly changed and she quickly began walking toward school.

"Emmy! Wait up!" Johnny called. They were almost in front of the school before he caught up to her. "What's your hurry?"

"We're gonna be late for class."

"You didn't seem to mind until I got here."

She frowned. "When did you get to be such a suspicious person?"

"I was born that way, remember?"

Her pace increased.

Johnny grabbed her arm. "Emmy, stop a minute!"

She pulled her arm free and kept on. "Don't do that!"

Johnny jumped in front of her, forcing her to stop. "What's going on? Why didn't you wait for me this morning?"

"What's your problem? You've been known to leave without me. Why is it a crime if I do it?"

"It's not a crime. I just want to know why you're avoiding me."

"I'm not avoiding you."

Johnny scoffed. "What do you call this footrace we've been running? I half expected you to break into a gallop!"

"Oh, so now I'm a *horse*? Thank you for your high opinion of me."

"No! Emmy . . . listen!" He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry about our argument at the diner yesterday. I'm sorry I grabbed your arm. I'm sorry about asking so many questions. And I don't think you're a horse—though I'm very fond of them myself. There. Now can we talk?"

Her nose poked into the air. "If you had anything interesting to say, I'd be happy to talk. But since you don't, I'll just have to keep 'avoiding' you. Excuse me." With that, she bounded up the school steps and thrust herself inside.

Flustered, Johnny stood at the stoop as dozens of kids filed past him. Something was definitely going on between Emmy and Al. Was he grilling her for the lowdown on the Confederate gold? Did he think she had some ownership in it, or perhaps that she could get him access to it? Whatever he was up to, Johnny smelled a rat. And that made him increasingly concerned for Emmy.

The bell rang and Johnny climbed the steps when a hard shove from behind sent him sprawling onto the landing. His knee slammed into the concrete, tearing open his trousers—

and his skin. Needle-poke pains shot through him. He wanted to cry out but held it back and grimaced instead.

"You need to watch where you're going, Johnny boy."

Johnny looked up to see Lazlo Farnsworth towering over him.

"You're pretty clumsy," Lazlo chided—a cruel smirk on his face. "You gonna cry? You need a hug?" He belched out a throaty laugh.

"You've caught me unprepared twice, Farnsworth," Johnny said. "There won't be a third time. Try anything again and you'll get back worse than you gave."

"Ooooh! I'm shaking," he said, quivering his hands in mock fear. "I heard you're some kind of karate chopper. Well, I ain't no piece of wood. You try that stuff on me and you'll wind up with more than a black eye."

"We'll see, won't we?" Johnny glared.

"Yeah, we will," Lazlo retorted.

At that point Wilson walked up. "Fall down, Whittaker?"

"With Lazlo's help," Johnny responded.

Instead of coming to his aid like last time, Wilson just nodded. "You'd better keep your eyes open, I guess." He stepped over Johnny and entered the building.

"See ya around, Skeezix," Lazlo sneered, then walked toward the door, diverting his steps just enough to intentionally mash Johnny's hand along the way.

Johnny couldn't keep from crying out in pain this time.

"Wow, you really are clumsy!" Lazlo taunted as he went inside.

"Boy, I thought I tol' you to steer clear of him!"

It was lunchtime. Johnny was in Ben's workroom, nursing his bruised hand and cut knee and munching on an egg salad sandwich. Emmy had requested a different assignment and was working on costumes with Wilson.

"I'm trying!" he answered. "I'm gonna have to grow eyes on every side of my head. That buffoon comes out of

nowhere!" He took a sip of milk. "But never mind him—what about the bank alarm deal? Great, huh?"

Ben stared at him. "You mean the deal you made without even consultin' me about it first?"

Johnny froze mid-bite. He lowered the sandwich. "Oh . . . I . . . I–I thought—"

"Did you? Or were you tryin' to be the big man agin?"

"No! Honest!" Johnny exclaimed. "I thought you'd be happy! And I really do think it will make the bank more secure!"

Ben's eyes narrowed. "From who?"

"Them!" Johnny pointed at the newspaper on Ben's workbench. The headline blared:

FEDS CALL FOR ALL-OUT WAR ON CRIME RINGS
HOOVER SEEKS TO CRUSH GANGS
Bank Robbery Syndicate Believed Comprised of Hardened Criminals, Shrewd Gang

Ben scanned the story. "We ain't had no trouble like that around here."

"Not *yet*!" Johnny replied. "But there're some shady characters around town."

"*Some*?"

"Okay, *one*!"

"And who's that?"

Johnny sighed. "Have you run into Al yet?"

Ben's brow furrowed. "The fella what kept yo' face from getting busted in by Lazlo? Yeah, I met 'im. Shook his hand 'til it almost fell off." He chuckled. "You think *he's* a bank robber?"

"Did you talk much to him?"

"For a spell. He was real friendly. Went on and on about the folks in town—how nice everyone is. Asked about Sunday services, Christmas festivities, them sorta things. I invited him to come to a few so he could meet the townsfolk."

"Hasn't his aunt already invited him?"

Ben blinked. “Aunt? Don’t recall him saying anything about no aunt.”

Johnny’s antenna shot straight up. “He told me his aunt wanted to know about how safe the bank was. But if he doesn’t have an aunt here . . .”

“Now, now, I never said he *don’t* have a aunt, just that he never *mentioned* her.” Ben snapped his fingers. “But come to think of it, he *did* ask about the bank. He wondered whether the police patrolled it. Sounded like he was thinking of depositing his own money, though.”

Johnny held up his hands. “C’mon, Ben! That doesn’t sound suspicious?”

“*Could* be . . . But you gotta be careful not to jump to conclusions. Sometimes the truth is hiding inside concealed places. A thinkin’ man looks at a problem from every angle he can ’fore the real picture comes into view.”

Johnny sighed. “So . . . you don’t want to do the alarm deal then?”

Ben scratched his chin. “I din’t say that. I just wanna be consulted ’bout things that concern me, same as anybody else. ’Specially when I’m not sure if I can do what you promised I can do.”

Johnny leaned in. “Of course you can!”

“You said he wants a button. I got a switch.”

“You can make a button!”

“And what about the signal to the sheriff’s station? How we gonna do that?”

“Easy! It’s just a matter of—” Johnny stopped. A smile curled his lips. “We?”

“Well, I ain’t doin’ this by myself! You committed *me*, you committed *you*, boy! Understand?”

Johnny jumped up. “Absolutely! We just need to adapt your fire alarm into a proper demonstration unit for the bank alarm. That shouldn’t be too hard.”

Ben nodded. “Awright. Let’s come up with a list of supplies. Once rehearsals is over, meet me back down here and we’ll get to work.”

Johnny grinned from ear to ear. “You got it, partner!”

The rest of day went as planned. Once Johnny had finished rehearsals, he hightailed it down to Ben's workroom and the two of them got started.

"Where you get these ideas, boy?" he asked Johnny. "Some of this stuff never even occurred to me! You got a bright future, John. A *real* bright future!"

"If I can stay out of trouble long enough," Johnny noted.

Ben measured a length of wire and snickered. "You know, I *loved* to read from the time I was little. My mama coun't read, so I read to her. She used to say the reason I read so well was 'cause I didn't like chores." Ben snipped and stripped a wire, then turned to Johnny and grinned. "She was right. Now here I am at this school—doing chores. The Good Lord used my laziness to teach me things I'm using right now." He nudged Johnny with his elbow. "He gon' use you, too. You wait and see if He don't."

It took longer to assemble the demonstration unit than they thought it would. By the time they got to the bank, it was closed. Johnny peeked in the window just to be sure Mr. Underwood wasn't still there, when a resonant voice from the street said, "Howdy."

Startled, Johnny spun about. A flashlight beam blinded him.

"Bank's closed up for the night." It was Deputy Miller. His flashlight zigzagged from Johnny to Ben. "What're y'all doin' out here?"

Ben explained about the alarm system, and Johnny about his concerns for the bank's safety.

"Alarm, eh?" the deputy mused. "And it'll be rigged up to the station . . . That's a right good idea!" He winked at Johnny. "Worried about yer gold, eh?"

"Well, it's not mine, but . . . yeah, I am worried about it—for a very specific reason." Johnny explained his thinking about Al.

Deputy Miller nodded thoughtfully. "You don't need to fret none. I've met the man. He seems nice, and so far he's

been a law-abiding citizen." Johnny started to respond, but the deputy cut him off. "Trust me, son. I'm on top of things. Now, if I were you two, I wouldn't be peeking in bank windows this late. Some folks might think *you're* looking to break in." With that, he tipped his hat, chuckled, and walked away, calling back, "You both best get on home!"

Johnny frowned, but Ben said, "He's right. We'll try this again tomorrow after school."

"Okay," Johnny nodded.

The two friends parted, each headed in opposite directions.

Johnny went to bed without supper that night—punishment for coming home so late.

But as he lay in bed, he wondered why his punishment wasn't harsher. He came up with two reasons: first, his explanation for his lateness. It was nearly six when he'd gotten home. His father had met him at the door with a stern lecture at the ready. But when Johnny told him and Fiona about the alarm, Harold blinked in astonishment. "Mr. Underwood actually *wants* to see your demonstration?"

"Yes, sir. We'd have shown it to him tonight, but we ran out of time."

Despite his anger, Harold was clearly impressed. "And you think it'll work."

"Absolutely!" Johnny nodded. "Ben's a great inventor. He's teaching me a lot. It'll work, all right."

"Quite the son ye have there, eh, Mr. Whittaker?" Fiona said with a smile.

And that was the second reason Johnny wasn't grounded: Fiona's response.

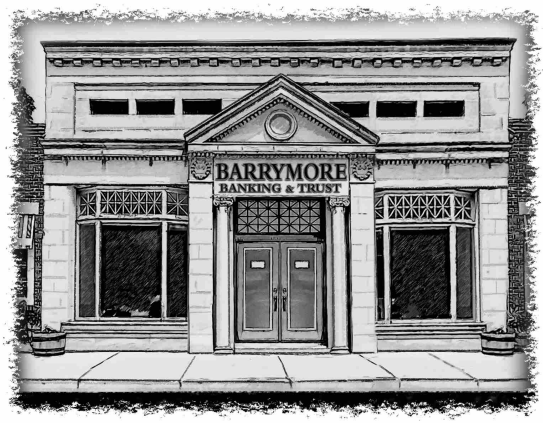
"Harold," she said, "the lad made a mistake, but don't expect him to be a man yet. Let him be a boy a while longer and make boy mistakes. Aren't you the one who says mistakes are the only way we can truly learn what's right?"

And just like that, being grounded was off the table.

What stuck in Johnny's mind as he felt his empty stomach growl was that Fiona's defense of him sounded remarkably like her old self. It had been almost two weeks since the accident, a full week since she'd learned she'd probably be blind permanently, and yet she seemed to be coming to grips with it, as though she was finding a path through her new dark world. That worried him—was she just denying her grief, setting herself up for a big fall later?

He wouldn't let that happen. He'd have the healing cloth back on Wednesday. Then he and his father would use it to regain her sight. And their troubles would be over.

Chapter Twelve



The alarm demonstration the next afternoon was a great success.

"This is a milestone for Barrymore Banking and Trust!" Mr. Underwood pompously announced to his audience of two, his arms waving grandiosely. "Installing this alarm system procures measures of technological security hitherto unaccomplished in our humble establishment. It is a bulwark of protection for the assets of our bourgeois clientele. My thanks to you both."

Johnny wondered if Underwood had swallowed a thesaurus, while he felt a sudden hunger for a dictionary. "You're welcome," he said. He could tell Ben got a kick out of the speech too, though all he said was, "Happy to be of help."

Underwood's smiling face turned inquisitive. "How long will the installation take and when will you be able to do it?"

"Oh, it shouldn't take mo' than a day, sir," Ben responded. "We need to do it when nobody's here."

"Tomorrow being Saturday," Underwood said eagerly, "the bank shall be closed. Would that work for you?"

"You bet," Ben replied. "We're all ready to go."

"Splendid!" Underwood gushed. "I shall see you here on the morrow!" He shook their hands once more and walked

back to his desk muttering, “A milestone! Momentous!”

Ben and Johnny smiled at each other, packed up the alarm equipment, and headed outside. Johnny thrust his hands into the air. “We did it!”

“Well, we still gotta install it,” Ben said with a smile. “You think you can stay outta trouble ’til tomorrow?”

Johnny chuckled and threw up his hands. “Who knows?”

Johnny and Ben met at the bank bright and early, their alarm system in tow. Mr. Underwood stayed with them for a couple of hours, excited and curious at first, but less so as the morning wore on and the job became more mundane. Finally, he’d had enough.

“I’ll leave you gentlemen to your work. I left my telephone number on my desk if you need to call me. Otherwise, just make sure the front door is locked when you leave.” Then, with a wink he added, “Not that we have anything to worry about anymore, eh?”

He opened the door briskly. On the opposite side stood Emmy, her fist raised to knock.

“Ah, Miss Capello!” Mr. Underwood greeted. “Are you here to help with the installation of our alarm system?”

“No, sir. I wondered if I could talk to Johnny.”

“Certainly! But not for long. He’s here on important business.” He patted her shoulder, then launched himself onto the sidewalk, whistling as he went.

“Hi, Ben,” she said as she entered. He gave her a wave and busily went about his work.

Johnny was installing a panic button behind one of the teller windows as Emmy approached the counter. “I went by your house. Your mom said you’d be here. This is impressive!”

“Not yet, but it will be.”

There was a pause. He kept working, and she took a deep breath. “I came to tell you a couple of things. First, I’m sorry I was so touchy the other day. I can’t even explain why. My mom thinks I’m going through a growth spurt. I don’t know if

that's a good excuse, but it's the only one I have."

Johnny couldn't suppress a mischievous grin. "Why is it that you and I seem to be apologizing to each other so much lately?"

Emmy returned the smile. "Maybe we're both growing up."

"Oh, I hope not!" Johnny said. "What was the second thing?"

"I have good news about the play!" Emmy replied excitedly. "I talked to Principal Ambrose yesterday."

"Did he agree to make the play a fund-raiser for Steve?" Johnny asked eagerly.

"Well . . . he said he'd think about it. But he *did* agree to let us sell Steve's Christmas cards at the performance!"

"That'll help," Johnny said, stripping a wire.

From across the room Ben called over, "If you two've settled things, I could use some help over here."

"Coming!" Johnny called back. "I'll let Steve know."

"Okay. See you. And again . . . sorry. Bye, Ben!"

"Bye, now!"

Johnny and Ben worked tirelessly, installing and testing the system. Finally, every door and window was secure. Johnny was especially proud of his electromagnetic sensors, which were virtually invisible to the untrained eye. "They's really somethin'," Ben said. "You got yourself a keen mind, boy. You give me a run for my money!"

The Whittakers stayed home from church again that Sunday. Even though Fiona's mood had improved greatly, she couldn't yet cope with the sympathies of the congregants, no matter how well-meaning they would be.

After lunch Johnny went to Steve's to tell him about the approval to sell his Christmas cards at the play. Steve had already drawn several additional designs. Johnny marveled at the detail of them.

"You're the best artist I've ever known," Johnny said. "I

mean it."

"You've never met any others, have you?" Steve asked.

"Well . . . no."

They both laughed.

"My dad's taking my sketches to the newspaper in Durham this week," Steve said. "You should have the cards in plenty of time for the play." He awkwardly added, "And . . . thanks a lot."

"Sure. You up for another game of 'Don't Chip the Tooth'?"

Steve grinned. "Time you learned a new game. We should play Flick instead. Grab that deck of cards on the dresser. First person to flick thirty cards into my dad's hat wins a piece of mom's famous apple strudel."

It wasn't even close. Steve shared the strudel with him anyway.

They were in the home stretch of rehearsals now. The performers used more costumes and props, and the sets, lighting, sound, and electrical effects worked great. There were still rough spots in the performances, but all in all things were coming along nicely. It promised to be a bang-up event —the highlight of the Christmas season.

As he brushed his teeth before bed Tuesday night, Johnny's mind wandered. He dared to hope that things in his life were finally getting better. The play was coming along well; he and Emmy were back to normal again; Lazlo had left him alone for the most part. Sure there was still a mystery to solve surrounding Al, but Johnny liked mysteries. Best of all, Arrie would be back tomorrow, and he'd get the cloth from her. Fiona would be able to see him play Scrooge after all!

By the time he snapped out of his reverie, he realized that he'd been brushing his teeth for at least ten minutes. He looked in the mirror to make sure he hadn't ground them down to nubs.

He climbed into bed and quickly drifted off to sleep, little

realizing just what joys and sorrow the next day would bring —and how they would change his life forever.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning was cold. Emmy had decided to go to school early to get some work done on the costumes, so he walked alone—again. He kept his eyes peeled for Lazlo . . . and Al.

But he didn't see Al at all, and he didn't encounter Lazlo until he arrived in the cafeteria theater. The sets were in place, and Lazlo was getting a final fitting of his costume: he held a long wooden staff and wore a floor-length robe with a large hood that hid his face. Although Lazlo's eyes were hidden, Johnny felt certain that the brute was watching him and sneering.

The rest of the morning passed without incident, but the rehearsal after lunch began with the scene between Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come—him and Lazlo, respectively.

As with most rehearsals, they started, stopped, and restarted several times, with Mrs. Wagner giving notes and suggestions. Every time Mrs. Wagner looked away, Lazlo poked and jabbed Johnny with his pointy staff. Johnny tried to ignore him, but the more he did, the harder the pokes and jabs became.

Things came to a head—literally—when Principal

Ambrose walked in to consult with Mrs. Wagner. As soon as she turned to talk to him, Lazlo, who was standing behind Johnny, raised the staff and brought the end down hard on Johnny's skull. A jolt of pain shot through him and his ears rang.

That was it. His patience and calm snapped.

Before he could stop himself, Johnny wheeled, let out a karate yell, and lashed out with a full-force sidekick against the staff, snapping it in two, followed by a roundhouse kick directly to Lazlo's kneecap.

The crack could be heard around the room. Lazlo screamed in surprise and pain and collapsed to the floor.

"Whittaker!" Principal Ambrose barked. "What have you done?"

"He hit me with that stick!" Johnny railed.

"I think my leg's broken!" Lazlo bellowed.

"Serves you right," Johnny retorted. "You've been asking for it for days! I told you I wouldn't put up with it anymore!"

A collective silence fell over the room. Principal Ambrose bounded to the stage, thrust out his arm, and pointed toward the door.

"My office! *Now!*"

"Just me?" Johnny objected. "Farnsworth gave me my black eye! And tore up my knee yesterday! And just whacked me over the head! I should be allowed to defend myself!"

The principal gritted his teeth. "I won't tell you again! Go!"

Johnny turned to leave. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Wilson poking his head out from behind the backdrop, desperately trying to hide his laughter. Avoiding everyone's gaze, especially Emmy's, Johnny stomped from the room.

Principal Ambrose's harangue lasted thirty-five minutes. Johnny's suspension lasted much longer.

"I cannot brook any fighting in school. You are suspended. Go home. We will see you back in school after Christmas

break."

Johnny's jaw gaped so wide you could throw a fish into it. "But, sir, what about my grades? And the play? I'm Scrooge!"

"You *were* Scrooge. That honor will now fall to Mr. Knox." Principal Ambrose wagged his head. "You disappoint me, Whittaker. The school needed you in that role. Your actions affect more people than you realize—a truth you'll have plenty of time to think about over the next several weeks."

Stunned, Johnny wandered into the deserted hallway. In the sheen of the early afternoon sun splaying through the corridor window was Ben, his back to Johnny, bent over a bucket and wringing soapy water from a rag. Johnny thought about trying to skirt past him unnoticed until Ben said, "So what's the verdict? You expelled?"

Johnny sighed. "Suspended until after Christmas break. And I'm not in the play anymore."

Ben swabbed at a particularly grimy corner of a windowpane. "Son, you're a tough one to figure. One minute you're out tryin' to save the world, the next you're fightin' agin' it." He stopped and sized him up. "Which boy are you really?"

Johnny shrugged. "The jury's out."

Ben shook his head. "I suppose that's true of lots of folks. But the sooner you get it settled, the happier you'll be." He swapped the rag for a clean cloth and began wiping the window dry. The saffron-tinted sunlight colored his rag and glistened in his eyes. "So what you gonna do now?"

Johnny thought for a moment and then said brightly, "Actually, I do have an errand to run, and then I think I'll stop by the bank and check on the alarm system." He took Arrie's address from his pocket.

Ben stuffed the cloth in his overalls and picked up the pail of soapy water. "Best get movin', then." He strolled down the hall without another word.

Arrie's home was situated a half mile west of town on Cherry

Tree Lane, an unpaved street lined with towering loblolly pines, their long-needled branches flocked with billowy tufts of snow. A black Chevrolet Eagle sedan was parked beside the white clapboard house. Johnny faintly saw some movement through the thin curtains in the window. He jumped up the porch stairs two at a time and knocked on the door.

Arrie opened it. “Well, look what the cat dragged in! You’re earlier than I expected. Shouldn’t you be at school?”

Johnny shrugged. “Not according to the principal.”

She chuckled. “Get into some trouble, did ya? You *are* like my brother.”

“I hope it’s all right that I came early,” Johnny said. “Is the cloth ready? I’ve got another stop to make.”

“No trouble t’all. C’mon in. I’ll snag it.”

Johnny stamped his boots and walked inside. Arrie crossed the front room and ducked around the corner. “What’s yer next stop, if ya don’t mind my askin’?” she hollered as she went.

“A friend and I installed an alarm system at the bank on Saturday,” Johnny called back. “I wanted to check on it. Just in case that guy from the diner gets any ideas.”

“An alarm system, huh?” she called from the other room. “Well . . . you must be a talented young man!”

“It’s mostly my partner’s creation,” he said. “But I do like making things.”

She rounded the corner, holding a brown paper package in her hands. “I wrapped your grandpa’s cloth up for ya. It’s clean as a whistle.” She handed it to him.

Johnny wanted badly to open it, to make sure it wasn’t some other worthless rag.

Arrie must have sensed as much. She said, “You wanna check to make sure?”

He nodded and tore open the corner. He would recognize the weave anywhere. It was definitely the healing cloth. He breathed deeply. His greatest fear was that he would find out it had been burned. Instead it was safe in his possession again.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Johnny said. “I appreciate you taking such good care of it. It means a lot to me.”

She smiled, exposing her crooked teeth. “I can see that.” She opened the door. “Glad it all worked out.”

Johnny stepped outside, bounded down the porch steps, and headed back toward town.

“Stay warm now!” Arrie called to him and then shut the door.

As far as Johnny could tell, the alarm system was in perfect working order. He discreetly checked the connections and then headed toward the front door. Mr. Underwood was hard at work behind his desk. Instead of interrupting him, Johnny waved and gave him a thumbs-up. Mr. Underwood reciprocated. Johnny smiled and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

He took a deep breath and headed down the street feeling quite optimistic despite being suspended from school and kicked out of the play. Big fat flakes of snow began to fall. Johnny wished it were Christmas tonight. It might be, he mused, if the cloth worked for Fiona.

He ran and slid across the icy sidewalk when a familiar voice from behind startled him. “Well, if it isn’t young John Whittaker.”

Professor Mangle held a paper bag from Coleman’s Grocers. His hat was pulled down, shading his eyes. Johnny couldn’t tell whether the man was pleased or upset to see him.

“Hi, Professor,” Johnny said. “Shopping?”

“Picking up a few things,” Mangle said, his voice flat and expressionless. *Awkward* was the word that came instantly to Johnny’s mind.

“So,” Mangle continued, “you offered to sell Steven’s Christmas cards at your school play, eh?”

Johnny nodded. “To raise funds to help pay his medical bills.”

“Yes . . . very kind.” Mangle eyed Johnny’s knapsack as though he knew its contents.

In spite of the bitter cold, Johnny’s hands turned clammy.

“Well, I . . . better get home. Tell Steve and Paul I’ll come by soon, if that’s okay.”

Mangle’s hat bobbed slightly.

Nervous, Johnny turned and stepped into the road. Mangle grabbed his arm and jerked him back harshly.

In such moments, time stops. In the course of a second, a dozen thoughts, feelings, and terrors can thrust themselves into the psyche. Johnny feared that Mangle was about to harm him. The look in his eyes peering from under the brim of his hat was laced with rage.

Johnny yanked his arm free and was about to call out for help. Then he heard the car horn blare and the tires of the vehicle squeal as it swerved to miss him.

“Watch where you’re going, boy!” Mangle barked.

The realization that Professor Mangle had just kept him from being struck by the car slowly seeped into Johnny’s senses.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, catching his breath. “I . . . wasn’t paying attention.”

“Obviously.” Mangle straightened up. He heaved a sigh. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. I . . . could’ve been killed.”

Through steely eyes, Mangle said coldly, “*Ich denke nicht* . . . I think not.”

Johnny’s mind fogged over. “What do you mean? A car going that fast—”

“You *know* what I mean,” Mangle interrupted. Then he leaned in so close that Johnny thought the man might take a bite out of him. “You have it, don’t you?”

Johnny’s stomach fell to his feet. “H-have what?” The cloak in his knapsack suddenly felt like it had gained twenty pounds.

Mangle’s menacing eyes scanned Johnny’s, looking for a way inside his mind. “How is Benjamin Huck?” he asked. “Recovering from his gunshot wound?”

Johnny’s eardrums pulsed and his body rocked with every thumping beat of his heart. “H-he’s fine. He doesn’t think he was shot after all.”

Mangle spoke quietly. “Not shot . . . and yet, all that blood . . .” Mangle’s gaze peered through Johnny. “I hope it didn’t ruin your . . . *shawl*.”

Johnny’s eyes widened. He had no idea what to say.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to say anything. At that moment another car honked at him. This one pulled up to the curb and the window rolled down.

“John!” Harold called.

“Dad!”

“Hop in! Don’t want you coming down with a cold.”

Johnny eagerly complied.

“Care for a ride, Karl?” said Harold. “Snow’s coming down pretty hard.”

“No . . . *danke*. I prefer walking.” Mangle looked directly at Johnny. “*Guten Abend*.”

As his father drove away, Johnny looked back. Mangle stood watching, the snow settling on him as if he were a statue.

Harold said, “I was driving home from the store when I saw you. What were you doing out there?”

Johnny’s heart was still pounding. He didn’t know where to start.

“John? What’s the matter, son? Are you all right?”

Johnny took a deep, steadying breath. He decided he needed to come clean about everything. “Remember when you said you were amazed at how much stuff happens to me in a single day? Well, today is no exception. I have a lot to tell you, Dad. Some of it really good, and some . . . really not good.”

Harold’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. “Tell me the not good first.”

“It’s all kind of blended together. The reason I was out there was because earlier this afternoon, I was at the bank, checking on the alarm system.”

Harold nodded. “I don’t want you skipping school, but checking on your work is laudable.”

Johnny swallowed. “Thanks, but, I . . . didn’t exactly *skip* school. The reason I was able to get there so early in the

afternoon was because I was suspended today until after the Christmas break." He explained what happened at the school, then braced himself for a lecture about using his karate solely for self-defense, about the responsibilities of a professor's son, and about being a good role model for others. But instead, Harold seemed surprisingly calm.

"Actually, this may be for the best."

Johnny blinked. "Why?"

Harold took a deep breath. "I never got around to telling your mother about you being in the play. She's been doing better, but not being able to see your performance might have set her back."

Johnny sighed. "Actually . . . she *may* have been able to see me."

Harold's brow furrowed. "What does that mean?"

Johnny's mind felt numb, his senses overwhelmed. "I . . . I have . . . the cloth."

Harold nearly ran off the road. "*What?* With you now? How?"

"It's a long story, but I managed to track it down."

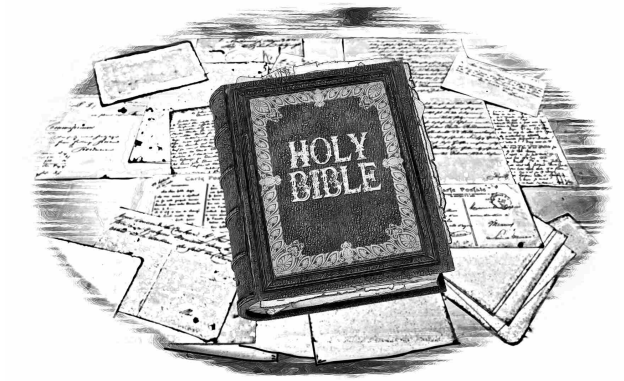
Harold broke into a smile. "That's phenomenal! Well done! I can't believe—"

"Dad. He *knows*."

Harold froze. "What? *Who?*"

The blood drained from Johnny's already-pale face. "Professor Mangle. He knows I have the cloth. And I think he'll do whatever it takes to get it from us."

Chapter Fourteen



Harold parked the car a block from home and grilled Johnny about how he located the cloth and about his exchange with Mangle. When Johnny finished, Harold stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I don't know, John. From what you've said, I believe Karl suspects, but I'm not convinced that he's certain we have it. I think instead he was probing; he didn't come right out and accuse you of having it. But he would have if he knew for certain."

"You think he was baiting me," Johnny said.

"Yes."

Johnny sighed. "I was going to visit Steve again soon, but now I'm not sure I should."

"You have to," Harold stressed. "Act like everything is normal. If you fall back now, he'll sniff out that he was right. I've known Karl long enough to recognize his strategy."

"But he had to see that I was scared."

"And what boy wouldn't be? It sounds like he was fairly intimidating. In fact, I'll call him on it when I return to work. He'd expect that as well."

"You think he was baiting you, too?" Johnny asked.

"Of course. Karl doesn't do anything without thinking it

through from every angle."

Harold started the car and turned on the wipers. In the few minutes they were parked, more than an inch of downy snow had accumulated on the windshield. He put the car in gear and pulled out, the tires slipping a bit until they gained traction.

The knapsack containing the cloth rested on Johnny's lap. He held it tightly. He hoped more than anything that Fiona would get her eyesight back. He imagined how it would play out.

He and his father would lay the cloth over her.

His father would hold her hands and pray for her eyesight to be restored.

The cloth would be lifted from Fiona's face.

Her eyes would blink . . . then open wide.

And then he imagined her joyfully jumping and hugging Harold, crying, and exclaiming over and over, "I can see! I can see! Thank you, John Avery! Thank you, John Avery! Thank you —!"

"Can I see it?" Harold asked, pulling Johnny out of his daydream. They were parked in their driveway.

Johnny nodded. He opened the knapsack and pulled the package from it. He gently unwrapped the paper, lifted the cloth, and held it up to his father.

Harold touched it, more as if he were collecting data than admiring a piece of history.

"Do you think we should see if it'll help Fiona?" Johnny asked.

Harold peered at Johnny. "I wish you'd call her your mother."

Johnny said nothing.

Harold laid his hand over the cloth—this time, it seemed, with reverence. "Yes. We should try."

Harold intentionally stoked less coal in the boiler than usual that night. He told Johnny that he wanted the house a bit

cool, expecting that Fiona would ask for a cover to keep her warm.

Of course, they would have just the thing waiting.

After dinner, the family sat in the living room for the reading from the Bible. Every year they read the entire book from Genesis to Revelation, two or three pages per night. Johnny wished they could forget it tonight and get to the urgent matter: the healing cloth. But Harold wanted everything to continue as usual.

Harold read first, from the book of Ephesians. After a few pages, he passed the book to Johnny. "From verse 18," he said.

Johnny reluctantly took the Bible and read: *"Be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

He stopped.

"Keep going, John Avery," Fiona said.

"Do I have to keep reading this?"

"You didn't finish the chapter yet, lad."

"I just . . . don't want to read it anymore."

"Why not?" Harold asked.

"I . . . just don't."

Harold's voice sharpened. "John, this is the Word of God. You may not like it, but in this house, you will always respect it."

Fiona's tender voice countered, "Harold, no need to swat a fly with a sledgehammer."

Charlie's eyes got big. "Can you *do* that, Daddy?"

"It's a metaphor, Charlie," Harold responded.

"What's a mefa-four? Charlotte asked.

"A mefa-four's a silly way to explain something," Fiona answered. "It's like saying my hands are ice."

"But your hands aren't made of ice, Mommy!"

That's right, dearest, but they are quite cold."

"Would you care for a blanket?" Harold offered.

"No, I may just go to bed. I've got a splitting headache."

“Is that a mefa-four too?”

“No dear, it’s an idiom, and it’s a fact.”

Fiona rose and oriented herself toward the bedroom. Johnny expected his father to say something to stop her, but her decision seemed to have found him unprepared as well. Finally, as she began walking away, Johnny blurted out, “But you can’t go to bed yet!”

Fiona turned, her eyes aimed in his general direction. “Oh? And why not?”

Before Johnny could think of an excuse, Charlie chimed in, “We haven’t prayed yet, Mommy. We always pray after we read the Bible.”

“That’s right,” Johnny agreed. “I’ll get you a blanket.”

“No, I’m fine. You three can pray without me tonight. I’m certain the Lord will understand.”

Johnny’s mind spun like a roulette wheel. He hoped it would land on a way to change her mind. “It’s . . . not the same without *you*,” he said. “Please? Just for a few minutes. Then you can go to bed.”

Fiona looked flummoxed. “You don’t want to read the Good Book but you want to pray? When have you ever given a whit about prayin’?”

“What difference does it make?” Harold asked. “He wants to now. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, dear.”

“Is a gift horse a mefa-four, Daddy?”

“Actually, it’s more of a proverb, Charlie.”

“I don’t remember that being in the Bible,” she said, her nose crinkled up in confusion.

“I’ll explain later.” Harold took Fiona by the hand and led her back to her chair. “Get your mother a blanket, John.”

“I’ll get one!” Charlie said.

“No, I’ve got one already,” Johnny blurted. He took the healing cloth—which he had placed under his chair before supper—and unfolded it carefully.

Something felt different about it. He didn’t know what at first but did when he held it up to lay over Fiona.

It wasn’t as long as it had been. A fairly large piece had been cut from it. *Who cut the cloth? Will it have any effect on its*

properties? Before Johnny could fully panic, Harold took hold of one end of the cloth, lifting it up so they could cover Fiona completely. Harold's brow furrowed, silently questioning Johnny's concern. Johnny ignored the gesture, and they laid the garment over Fiona, covering her up to her neck.

Johnny wished he could lay a part of it directly on Fiona's eyes, but they couldn't do that without giving the scheme away.

Charlie said, "Where did you get that blanket? It looks old."

Leave it to Charlie to say the worst possible thing at the worst possible time.

"You're such a loudmouth," Johnny snapped at her.

"John Avery," Fiona said, with equal parts scolding and questioning. She felt the cloth. "This isn't a blanket. It's some sort of linen cloth. Where *did* you get this, John?"

Harold took the lead. "What difference does it make? Let's pray so you can get to bed. Everyone bow your heads."

"Hold on a minute, Harold," she said. "What are you boys up to?"

"Up to?" Harold said.

"We just want to—"

Fiona cut him off. "*Don't* finish that sentence until every ounce of untruth is wrung from it! It's a bold sinner who would mix a lie into a prayer."

Johnny said nothing more.

"Charlie, run up to bed," Harold insisted. "I'll tuck you in after a little bit. Your brother and I need to talk about something with Mommy."

"But we were gonna pray," she said.

"I'll pray with you when I tuck you in. Go on, now."

"Yes, Daddy." She got up and pattered away up the stairs and down the long hallway to her room.

"Dad, are you sure we should?" Johnny whispered.

He nodded. "I'm sure," he softly responded.

"I can hear you both, ya know," Fiona said. "The ear bone's not connected to the eye bone. Now fess up. What's going on?"

Harold took Fiona's hand. "What I'm about to tell you will be difficult to believe, but I need you to listen with an open mind." He summarized everything he knew about the journal and the cloth. What he didn't know or had forgotten to mention, Johnny filled in.

"There are other pieces I'm trying to put together now," Harold explained. "I can't say for certain that this is the same cloth, but my father-in-law felt sure. At least that's what he noted in his journal."

Fiona sat quietly for a moment, thinking. "So . . . why have you lain it on me? If it is that cloth, it should be locked away. Or in a museum."

"Fiona, this cloth has been associated with healing people. No one needs healing more than you."

"No, Harold."

Johnny watched in disbelief as she pulled off the cloth.

"No? What do you mean, no?" Harold asked incredulously.

"I mean, the Lord knows better than we do what we need. It's taken me these past weeks to understand that. I canna say that I don't miss seeing the sunrise in the morning or the dear faces of my family, but I won't presume to tell the Lord that He got it wrong when I hit that tree. I won't tempt Him. Not *even* for my sight." As she spoke, she folded the cloth and held it out for someone to take.

Johnny took it, though his heart sank. "Don't you think God *can* heal you?"

"Of course I do, child! But I don't think He needs a piece of cloth to do it."

Harold countered, "The biblical narrative does provide examples where He did that very thing. The woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment, for one."

"Yes, and handkerchiefs and aprons that touched the Apostle Paul were taken to the sick and they were cured. I know it did happen," she responded.

"Then why *not* try it now?" Johnny asked.

"I've already prayed for healing, John. Many times. And the Lord has seen fit to keep my eyes closed."

Harold squeezed her hand. “One more prayer wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

But Fiona’s mind was made up. “Dunna try that tack on me! Of course another prayer wouldn’t hurt. But using this cloth could! It could hurt a great deal! Where does our faith lie if we trust a thing more than God? This is thin ice you’re walkin’ on. ’Sides, if it does somehow possess power to heal—God knows why—what would happen if an unscrupulous person got hold of it?”

Johnny and Harold locked eyes. They couldn’t argue this point, since they both had worried about Professor Mangle’s seeming obsession with obtaining it.

“You don’t even know what it truly is, or where it first came from,” she continued. “Imagine that it would heal me. Word would get out about it. Especially in a small town like this. Someone would try to take it, and in the hands of fallen men an item of that power would do more harm than good. It’s like . . . Plato’s ring of Gyges. The power it gives is too strong for anyone to handle. No, I want no part of it.”

The hope Johnny had been storing inside—that Fiona might get her sight back—melted away like a cloud driven by a buffeting wind. “Don’t you *want* to see again?” he asked softly.

Fiona reached out her hand, searching for his face. When she found it, she tenderly stroked his cheek. “I see you in my memories and in my heart. I’ll never forget those pictures.”

Harold looked shattered. Johnny slowly rose. As he did, the cloth slid from his lap onto the floor. A mixture of anger, frustration, disappointment, and feelings he couldn’t put names to welled up within him. He clenched his jaw, ran up to his bedroom, fell on his bed, and wept bitterly.

Johnny heard a soft *knock-knock-knock* at his door. That wouldn’t be his father. He always gave one sharp knock before barging in. A gentle voice on the other side inquired, “John Avery? May I come in?”

Johnny sat up and wiped the tears from his face. “Yes.”

The door opened and Fiona walked in. “I’ve brought you your blanket.”

“Thanks,” he said. She handed it to him, and he tossed it onto the lid of the trunk.

Fiona’s head turned left, then right. Hands on hips, she declared, “My, but this room is a mess!”

“No, it isn’t,” Johnny retorted. “I cleaned it this morn—”

Fiona laughed and clapped her hands in appreciation of the joke.

Johnny couldn’t help being amused, even though he said, “That wasn’t very funny.”

“It wasn’t, eh? Then why are you smiling?”

Johnny puzzled. “How do you know I’m smiling?”

“A smile isn’t just something you see, it’s also something you *hear*. Although I haven’t been hearing too many out of you lately.”

“I haven’t had much reason,” Johnny said, the smile all but gone.

“Oh, is that a fact? And may I ask, what do you have to be unhappy about?”

Johnny wanted to look at her now but couldn’t. Every time he had, he saw her eyes glaring off vacantly into space. Acknowledging that she would never see again made the world a bit darker for him as well.

“I’m waiting,” she prodded.

“I’ll *never* be truly happy again because of . . . what happened to you.”

“It’s not a dirty word, John. You can say it.”

“No. I can’t.”

“My blindness is my burden, isn’t it? Why should it make you so unhappy?”

“I always pestered you about going riding.”

“And I loved doing it with you. It’s not as if you were makin’ me do something I dinna wanna do.”

Johnny fidgeted, wondering what to say . . . how much to say. “But now you can’t ride anymore. You can’t do lots of things you used to do.”

“Well, I dunno about that,” Fiona mused. “But even if that *were* true, it’s still my concern, not yours.” She sat down beside him on the bed and held out her hand. Johnny placed his hand in hers. She gripped it tightly. “Am I right?”

Words. How to use words to describe feelings. He wished he could turn on a spigot and let all his feelings flow straight from his mind into hers. But like Grandpa used to say, “You can’t use the tools you don’t have.”

“John Avery,” Fiona pressed, “tell me the truth. Why are you unhappy, lad?”

Johnny searched deep into his mind for the answers that even he hadn’t understood. Before he could put the pieces together, the words came out. “Because . . . because you *aren’t*!”

The answer seemed to surprise Fiona as much as it had him. “What? I don’t understand.”

“You remember before the accident how I told you that you didn’t know how I felt about my mother because you never lost anything?”

“I recall something about that. I don’t remember everything we discussed—that day is a bit hazy for me.”

“See, that’s what I mean! You lost something that day, something really important, and you’re still not unhappy!”

“No, I’m not. I was, but not anymore. That’s been replaced with peace.” She scooted close to him and put her arm around his shoulders. Leaning her head down close to his, she said, “That makes you angry, doesn’t it?”

“Yes!” The emotions freely burst out from him now. Before he could stop them, tears welled up in his eyes and spilled over onto his cheeks.

Fiona held him close. He hadn’t felt that loved or protected since his mother died. The thought of his mother’s hand stroking his hair, the stories she told him at bedtime, her silly faces that made him laugh, the times he curled up on her lap—all these memories and dozens more heaped one on top of another. He didn’t think he would ever feel happy again when she died. He cried for the memories he had and the ones he had forgotten. All the while, Fiona rocked him back and

forth. She didn't tell him to stop. Somehow she seemed to know how old those tears were and how long they had been waiting to carry his feelings to the surface.

Johnny couldn't say how long that went on. What he did know, though, was that even with all those tears, he still felt an ache that needed its own healing.

"Fiona?"

"Yes, child."

"How *can* you be happy all the time?"

"Well, in the first place, I'm not always happy. I still get upset—as you well know. But when that happens, you know what I do?"

Johnny shook his head. He instantly felt silly because she couldn't see him doing it. He was about to say, "No, what?" but before he could, she answered.

"I remember an old Scottish prayer that my mam taught me when I was a little girl. *'Lord, I've thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses. But never once for my thorn. Teach me the glory of my cross. Teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of my pain. Show me that my tears have made rainbows. Amen.'"*

Johnny contemplated the idea of being thankful for difficult times. It made no sense to him.

"You see, John Avery, everything has a purpose—even the bad things. We need to stop thinking about ourselves and look up."

"Knowing that makes you happy?" Johnny asked.

"Yes, that's part of it."

He thought for a moment, then asked, "What's the rest of it?"

Fiona smiled. "Lad, you know the rest, whether you realize it or not. It's right in front of you—you read from it every single night."

"The Bible?"

"Yes. It's like . . . God's journal. And He allows me to read it anytime."

Johnny hadn't considered the Bible that way before. "But I read it too."

"Aye, but you read it with your *head,* not your *heart.* You have to read it with both; to listen and try to understand what the words are sayin'. And Who's sayin' 'em."

Johnny remembered his grandfather's journal. He treasured that gift, even though he couldn't understand much of it. That it was given to him specifically made him feel special. Loved. He hadn't considered that the same could be true of the Bible.

"I've never—at least not in a long time—trusted God. Not since my mom and grandpa died."

The faintest hint of sadness flashed across Fiona's face. "It's hard to lose the people we love—I know that all too well. *But* . . ." she said, "we're all going to die someday. And you know what? I'm glad of it! I wouldn't want to live in this world forever. I'm looking forward to the world *to come*."

Every time he thought about heaven, Johnny chalked it up to nothing more than a silly, sentimental notion. A thing people said they believed but never thought through rationally. "Do you really believe there's a heaven hiding somewhere in the universe?"

Fiona's eyes, unable to see anything in this world, almost seemed to look straight into the next. "I don't know where 'tis, lad, but yes . . . I *do* believe. Believin' gives me a peace and joy that's unexplainable and beyond understandin'."

"It'd be easier for me if I *could* see it."

"Would it? A wise Scottish man once said, 'Seeing is not believing. It's only seeing.' I understand that even better these days."

"But how can you believe after . . . what happened to you?"

Fiona's face grew strong. "My *blindness*, John. You can say the word."

Actually, he couldn't.

"I've discovered that losing my sight—although it was difficult at first—has brought me even closer to God."

"*Closer?* How?"

Fiona smiled sweetly. "Young John, always searching for answers. In this case, you won't find one that measures up to

what you want to hear. It's that peace I mentioned, 'which passeth all understanding.' It's not part of an equation, or a scientific theory. It's bigger than that."

The concept eluded Johnny. "But if He's really God, He made all this. So how can it be bigger?"

"You made something a few days ago. What was it?"

"A barometer. To tell weather by. I knew the snowstorm was coming because of it."

"Did it tell you *why* it's snowing?"

"Sure, the pressure changes when—"

"No, I don't mean what's causing it to change. I mean . . . why is it snowing? Do we need the extra moisture for some reason? What's the purpose of it?"

"No one knows that."

"Ah, there is One who does. Science only takes us so far. After that . . . is God."

Johnny had no argument to counter that. "It's hard for me to think that way. Science makes sense because there are laws that determine how the world works. Religion means shutting off your mind and just believing it even though it *doesn't* make sense."

Fiona searched for Johnny's hand and, finding it, held it tightly. "John Avery, I canna see whether you're beside me—but I know you are. I hear your voice, but I dunna know for certain that it's your hand I'm holding."

"There's no one else in the room with us," Johnny countered.

"Oh? I canna be sure of that. My eyes don't show me whether it's true or not."

"Well, I'm telling you there isn't."

"And I believe you. I take your word for it because I trust you." She put her arm around him. "It's no different with God, laddie. He's proven Himself to me over and over. I take His word on faith, too. And though I canna see Him, I *know* He exists. I talk to Him just like I'm talking to you. And though my ears canna hear Him, my *soul* hears Him."

In that moment, Johnny loved Fiona as much as he ever loved his mother. He remembered Janneth talking to God that

way too. And he remembered the dream—the one that came late in the night when sleep was so thick that you couldn't wake from it. In particular he recalled a moment that he'd never realized before—his grandfather and his mother were praying fervently over him. He was just a little child. And he was crying. How could he recall a detail from when he was so little?

He remembered feeling something he couldn't describe, something there's no word for. And laughter, and his mother scooping him up and crying while she laughed. And he felt something else too. Something there *is* a word for.

Peace. He hadn't felt that in a long time. He wanted to feel it again now.

"I can't hear God's voice," Johnny said, tears welling up in his eyes.

"No, lad. You *can* hear it. You just don't realize it's Him talking."

"How do I do that? Johnny asked, tears spilling down his cheeks again.

Fiona held him tightly. "A favorite quote of mine is from a wise man by the name of G. K. Chesterton. He wrote that there are two ways of gettin' home: The first is to stay there. The other is to walk round the whole world 'til we come back to the same place. It's like that with God. I've known Him since I was a wee bairn and I've stayed with Him all my years. Other people search and search—trying and believing everything but him—eventually findin' themselves in front of Him anyway. When we put our trust in Him, that's when we can hear His voice. And it's such a sweet voice, lad."

"I don't know how to get there, though," Johnny said.

Fiona squeezed him tightly. "Jesus is the way . . . for all of us. What does He tell us to do to find our way to Him? Repent of our sins; turn to God; have faith. Then we receive the gift of eternal life. This world canna give us joy because true joy doesn't exist without God."

Johnny wiped the tears from his face. He took a deep breath and inhaled more than air. He breathed in hope. This is what he wanted. It's what he guessed he always wanted.

“Will you help me do that?” he said.

Johnny saw tears coming down Fiona’s face now. Glad tears that channeled over her cheeks, into her laugh lines, and down to her huge smile. “Oh, John Avery, ’course I will!” She held his hand again. “Are you ready?”

Johnny felt a little uncertain, not knowing how this would change his life, and yet truly knowing that he would never be the same. Happily resigned, he said, “I’m ready.”

As Fiona prayed with him, Johnny felt the weight of carrying his own struggles being lifted and replaced with incomprehensible peace.

For the first night in a long while, Johnny fell into a completely deep, restful sleep. Draped over his grandfather’s trunk was an old piece of cloth. A cloth, he decided before he drifted off, that he would have to eventually destroy.

Chapter Fifteen

The next morning, Johnny woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep. He thought about the events of the day before, and then the ones to come. Once his brain engaged there was no turning it off.

Instead of waiting for the sun to rise, he decided to occupy his time productively. First he tucked the cloth into his trunk and locked it. He leaned out of his bedroom window and checked the barometer. He put it in his knapsack to take another reading down at the river. He decided to find out whether there would be a difference near the water, and if there was, extrapolate how that would affect weather patterns in the area.

When he came downstairs—McDuff trailing at his heels—his father was at the table reading the paper. Johnny secured his father's approval for his expedition. Then he grabbed a flashlight, and he and McDuff made their way to the river.

They arrived as day began to break. The river was a solitary space where a young boy could lose himself in the stillness of the morning. Somehow, everything seemed more vibrant and alive today.

The cold air hung thick over the water in patches of fog. The weather felt damp and seemed to dim every color but a

tenacious powdery blue. The water was bitterly cold, though not cold enough to freeze, other than the sections tucked away from the current.

As McDuff explored the surrounding terrain, Johnny pulled the barometer from his knapsack and set it down beside the water. Several large flakes had appeared in the storm glass. He sat on a nearby rock to wait, allowing time for it to adjust to its new location.

Upstream, a logjam diverted what water it couldn't hold back. Johnny saw a beaver swimming toward it with a branch in its mouth, one end freshly chewed. He breathed deeply. This place made the cares of life evaporate, and for that he treasured visiting it whenever he could. Then he realized it wasn't this *place* at all, but Who was at this place *with* him that made it worth treasuring. Just yesterday he hadn't been able to understand the joy of God's company. He marveled at how different his life had been a mere twenty-four hours earlier.

He heard a branch snap on the other side of the river and looked up, expecting to see another industrious beaver at work. Instead, beside a sapling evergreen tree stood the mysterious boy he had seen months ago by the old Granville House.

Johnny jumped up. The boy smiled and waved. Johnny smiled and waved back. He motioned for the boy to join him, though he wasn't sure how since the nearest bridge was a quarter mile upstream. The boy seemed to consider it, then looked over his right shoulder, startled, and took off down the path beside the river, disappearing into the snow-covered forest.

Seconds later, Wilson and Lazlo appeared and chased after the boy, their arms filled with snowballs they launched in his direction. They too disappeared into the tangle of trees, laughing as they went.

McDuff barked earnestly, darting back and forth along the riverbank.

Johnny's instinct was to get across and help the boy, but the three boys ran in the opposite direction from the bridge.

He'd never be able to catch up.

He called out for Wilson and Lazlo to "knock it off and get to school," but his voice was swallowed up in the loud flow of the current.

Three things occurred to him:

First, he wondered again who this mystery boy was. Johnny had never seen him at Brookhaven, so he assumed he went to school in Durham. But if that was so, why wouldn't he already be on his way there? Classes would be starting soon.

Second, though Lazlo limped a bit, he hadn't been seriously injured by Johnny's karate kick after all.

Third, Wilson just confirmed that he and Lazlo weren't adversaries but rather in cahoots. Wilson *had* certainly set up that first confrontation so that he could appear brave and courageous in front of Emmy.

Pathetic.

"I wouldn't try swimming if I were you," a voice called out. As if she knew he was thinking about her, Emmy appeared out of nowhere. McDuff scampered over to her. She bent down and petted his head.

"Did you see those two?" Johnny asked.

Emmy's expression suggested a question mark. "No, who?"

"Wilson and Lazlo were chasing the phantom boy I saw at the water tower."

Emmy's question mark morphed into a disgusted exclamation point. "I'd hoped Wilson was changing. I guess not. Is the boy okay?"

"I don't know. He had a head start." A thought occurred. "How did you know where I was? And shouldn't you and Lazlo and Wilson all be at school rehearsing?"

She walked up to him. "I stopped by your house. Your dad told me you were out here. Since you were suspended, Principal Ambrose and Mrs. Wagner needed time to regroup and gave us all the morning off. We're supposed to go back this afternoon."

"So I take it Lazlo wasn't suspended."

Emmy shook her head. "No. It's not fair. But I'm glad you

whomped him. He had it coming."

Johnny nodded. "Yes, he did. I am sorry for you, though."

"Me? Why?"

"Since *I* can't play Scrooge, my understudy will have to do it. And my understudy is—"

Emmy turned pale. "Wilson Knox."

"Yep. The guy who chases defenseless kids. He's got the Scrooge part down, but I don't think any number of ghosts could convince him to change his ways."

"Well, I guess we'll have to make do," Emmy muttered. "He won't be anywhere near as good as you, but, well, you saw his audition. Wilson may be a twit, but he can act."

Johnny exhaled warm air onto his cold hands, then impishly asked, "So . . . are you gonna kiss him?"

Emmy's face instantly screwed up with disgust. "Yuck! Never!"

Johnny laughed.

"Rumor has it, though, that Mrs. W. is giving Scrooge a song to sing," she said.

"A song?"

Emmy nodded. "It was in the works before all this happened. She thought a song would be a good way to end the production."

"Wilson singing . . . ," Johnny mused. "Sounds like a disaster waiting to happen."

"No kidding." Emmy smirked and then seemed to remember something. "Oh! One other thing happened yesterday after you left. Principal Ambrose announced that the show *will* be a fund-raiser for Steve!"

"That's fantastic!" Johnny beamed.

"He ran the idea by the school board, and they all agreed that even though Steve doesn't go to school at Brookhaven, he's still a part of our community. 'People before programs,' he said."

Emmy walked to the riverbank and watched the fog rising off the water. "So . . . whatever happened with your grandpa's fabric? Did you get it back?"

Johnny had wondered when she'd get around to asking

about that. “I did. What a relief!” He wanted to switch the topic and debated whether he should tell her about what had happened to him last night—how his life had changed. But before he could, she switched tracks herself.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “Some kind of experiment?”

“Uh, yeah.” He pointed to the barometer. “Weather stuff.” He stuck his hands in his pockets. “Oh, and I stopped by the bank yesterday afternoon to check on the alarm system. Just in case.”

Emmy’s lips pursed together so tightly that Johnny thought her mouth had disappeared. “Just in case what?”

“You know what. Or should I say *who*?”

She sighed, frustrated. “You’re *still* on with that nonsense about Al being a bank robber?”

“It’s not nonsense! You saw him lurking around the bank, didn’t you? ’Cause that’s where he *always* is!”

She bristled. “He doesn’t ‘lurk.’ He was just standing! Why are you so prejudiced against him?”

“I’m not prejudiced. I’m observant,” Johnny replied. “After you stormed out of the diner the other day, Arrie told me she didn’t trust him either. In fact, she said that he was talking to some other fella who called him by a different name . . . Sam or Ham. *And*,” he said, his arms crossed, “they were talking about the bank. She said they were talking about casing it—looking it over to find a way to break in and steal things.”

Emmy’s jaw clenched. “I know what casing a place means. I’m not stupid.”

“I know you’re not—”

“Then don’t treat me that way!”

Johnny didn’t realize how much fire she had in her eyes until that moment. He hadn’t meant to stoke it, and he certainly didn’t like being this close to it. One more bit of fuel and she just might detonate, with him in the blast radius. McDuff must have sensed it too. He whimpered nervously.

Johnny gently said, “Okay, let’s try this one more time. I really didn’t mean to upset you. The thing is, as your friend, I worry about you. I don’t know who that guy is. I don’t even

know his last name! And who's his mysterious aunt? And—"

"Spade."

"What?"

"Spade. His last name is Spade."

Johnny almost laughed out loud. "Al *Spade*? Seriously?"

Emmy huffed. "Yes, seriously. Why don't you believe a word I say anymore?"

"It's just kind of a funny last name, don't you think? Have you ever heard of anyone whose last name was Spade?"

"No. Have you?"

"Of course I have! In a book. *The Maltese Falcon.* Sam Spade is the detective in it," Johnny said. "My guess is that Al read that book too. And stole the name."

"Oh, brother. Not every person is hiding something, Sherlock."

Now Johnny bristled. "Really? Did he ask you more about the bank?"

Emmy froze. He knew he had guessed correctly.

"He did, didn't he?"

"He's being diligent. Money's hard to come by these days, and he doesn't want his aunt to lose it."

"Or money's hard to come by, and he's looking for a way to get his hands on some."

The look on Emmy's face had all the marks of disappointment. She stared at the ground, shivered at the cold, and muttered at the dog, "I should go."

Johnny sighed. "Look, I'm sorry, Emmy. I just don't know why you're so touchy about that guy."

Emmy had relaxed a bit—until the word *touchy*, at which point she flared right back up again. "You're hopeless, you know that? Hopeless!" She spun around and stomped away.

Johnny picked up the barometer. "Wait! I'll go with you."

"No," Emmy said, walking on, her back still to him. "We're not going the same way."

Johnny shook his head in frustration. One day a kiss, the next . . . McDuff looked up at him with a stupefied expression, as if to say, "Don't be a dope. Go after her!"

"Sorry boy. As Falstaff says, 'The better part of valor is

discretion.' A soldier has to know when to retreat and save the fight for another day."

He sighed. Fiona had said being a Christian wasn't always easy. And yet . . . he still felt a remarkable peace within him. Something truly *had* changed.

He held up the barometer to get a reading. Crystals had formed at the bottom of the glass and even more large flakes floated throughout it.

"Frost. And more snow on the way." He stuck the barometer in his knapsack, slung it over his shoulder, and, humming "Winter Wonderland," made his way with McDuff back to the house.

Chapter Sixteen

Johnny thought he would go see Steve that afternoon, but his folks had a different idea. The Whittaker family would spend the next few days celebrating Johnny's newfound faith. First up was to go Christmas tree hunting.

They drove north of town to a spot Emmy's father raved about.

"The trees ina that place look like they were *made* for Christmas. So very full—and justa the right shape! *Bellissimo!*" He squatted down and whispered to Charlie, "In fact, rumor is that Santa himself planted those-a trees!"

Charlie's eyes lit up. "For real?"

Fiona intervened. "No, dear, not for real." Then she added, with a broad smile, "Though it is fun to pretend, isn't it?"

The place Mr. Capello pointed them to was beautiful. Snow lazily fell from a frosty sky. Almost every tree was so perfectly shaped that they could have chosen any one. Which, of course, made the decision more difficult.

As they meandered into the forest, an impromptu snowball fight broke out. Johnny thought for sure he'd have the upper hand since he was a pretty good baseball pitcher. But he was surprised by Fiona, who threw a wicked fastball that caught him hard in the chest.

“I was a pitcher m’self when I was a lass,” she gloated. “I’m no Lefty Grove, mind you, but the Red Sox could do worse!” At that moment a swooping snowball caught her unprepared, hitting her square in the shoulder.

“That’s my Satchel Paige pitch!” Johnny retorted.

After their arms gave out, the tree hunt resumed. Johnny and Harold favored a tall, spire-like tree that looked as if it were pointing straight to heaven. The girls fancied something wider and shorter. Charlie spotted a prime candidate just ahead. She grabbed Fiona’s hand and led her through the snow toward it, laughing and giggling the entire way.

“Seeing your mother laugh like this is the best gift I’ve ever received,” Harold said. “To be honest, I didn’t think life would ever be right-side up again.” He looked down at Johnny. “A moment can change your whole life. For the good or the bad.”

“Dad,” Johnny asked, “why do you think God allowed her, of all people, to go blind?”

“John, now that you’ve chosen to identify yourself as a Christian, you’ll find out there are some things we can fully understand—mainly because God states them explicitly in the Bible—and there are other things, such as your mother’s blindness, that we will never understand. At least, not fully. But faith means choosing to trust, even though we may not understand the *why*.”

“But as scientists and intellectuals, shouldn’t we challenge those things?”

Harold smiled. “Of course. We should evaluate everything diligently. The worst thing that could happen is to believe something in error and build a poor theology around it. But when we come to events that make no human sense, as Christians we lay our questions over the understanding we have of God and His nature, character, and ability. And then we simply trust.”

Johnny wondered if he should ask the question, but did anyway. “Do you think the cloth could’ve healed her?”

“We’ll never know. But she’s accepted her blindness, so we should too.”

Fiona called out, waving, “We found it! The perfect tree!”

Harold raised his eyebrow. “Gadzooks. We’ve been outflanked by a chubby Christmas tree.” Looking up at the tall beauty he and Johnny had chosen, Harold said, “It seems we have a fight on our hands, my boy.”

“Spire versus Chubs. The battle of the trees.”

“Gird your loins, m’boy. It’s going to be a fight to the finish.”

Father and son laughed as they trudged through the snow toward the girls.

That night, the Whittaker family strung popcorn and hung tinsel and colorful ornaments as Richard Himber and his Ritz Carlton Orchestra played “Winter Wonderland” on the Victrola.

Chubs stood in his corner, victorious.

Miles away, Spire stood solemnly in the cold night air, pointing toward the heavens.

The next day was Friday, and Johnny announced that even though the weather was cold, he wanted to spend as much time as possible doing things outside.

They began the day sledding. Since the kids were still in school, they had the best hill all to themselves. They only had one sled, so they took turns. Harold was on a run with Charlie, while Johnny and Fiona waited their turn.

“What does it look like today, John?” Fiona asked, lifting her chin to feel the breeze.

Johnny tried to notice every color so he could paint the best picture for her. “There’s as much open sky as there are clouds,” he started.

“Yes, I feel the sun warming me,” she responded.

“There are a few cumulous clouds, but more cirrostratus than anything. You can see right through them. It’s like looking at a foggy mirror. And there’s a halo around the sun. It’s really pretty.”

Fiona smiled. “I can imagine.”

“The leaves have fallen, but the branches are covered with snow so the trees look like ghosts. And the snow is cornflower blue.”

“I just see white,” said Charlie, trudging back to the top of the hill with Harold behind. Fiona laughed.

Fiona and Johnny went down next. Fiona laughed harder than she had in weeks. “Ach, the feel of the wind agin’ my face breathes life into me!” she said.

Later they went Christmas shopping. In the Five & Dime, Johnny saw something he desperately wanted. An oval lunch kit with a picture of Mickey Mouse and his “Steamboat Willie” friends on the sides. As a fan of Walt Disney’s imagination, it was his one wish for Christmas.

His father’s response: “Frivolous. You already have a perfectly good lunch pail.”

Johnny sighed and rolled his eyes when through the storefront window he saw a familiar face.

It was Al leaning against a lamppost, looking at a building down the street. The Barrymore Banking and Trust building. Johnny was glad the alarm was in place. If Al was after the gold, the system would protect it.

Later that day they stopped by the diner for pie.

“Apple, blueberry, cherry, lemon meringue, or pecan?” Arrie asked.

“One of each,” Fiona announced. “We’ll share. That way we can enjoy every option.”

“My kind of thinker,” she said writing the order on her pad. “Say, I went to the bank yesterday morning,” Arrie said. “Your alarm thing worked like a charm.”

“It went off?” Johnny asked.

“Yeah, not sure why, but the cavalry came a-runnin’ when it did.”

“And no one was breaking in?”

Arrie winked. “Do I look like a desperado to you?”

Johnny pondered. “Maybe there’s a loose connection somewhere. Or someone got excited and pushed the button by accident.”

“Seems like it went on for some time before they shut it

off," Arrie said.

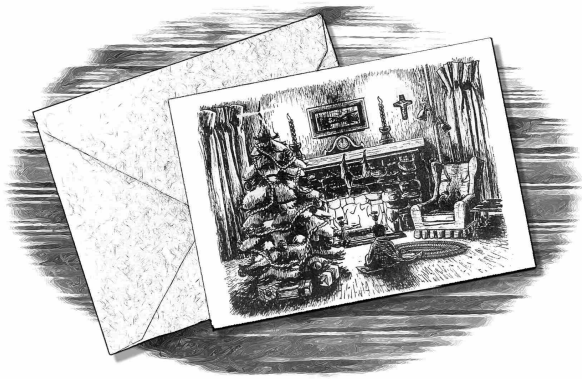
"Well, the main power's in the basement," Johnny replied. "Takes a while to get to it."

Over the top of the booth, Johnny noticed the back of a head turn as if to listen. *That was careless,* he thought. *I shouldn't have said any of that.* He decided to end the topic. "I'll get with Ben. We'll install an independent power source. Maybe a kill switch, too."

Right after Arrie brought out their pie, the person in the booth next to theirs got up to leave. Johnny caught a glimpse of him as he left.

It was Al.

Chapter Seventeen



The next morning, Johnny lay in bed, his mind busy. He had awoken early again. He watched the morning break outside his window. The snow whitewashed the landscape. A downy woodpecker drummed the trunk of a nearby tree. Johnny marveled at the beauty of God's creation.

As he planned out the next few days—including selling Steve's cards at the play tomorrow night—the smell of coffee and bacon wafted into his room. He jumped out of bed, tucked his feet into his slippers, and grabbing his robe, went downstairs.

Fiona stood in front of the range, a spatula to turn the bacon in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. "I'd know those footsteps anywhere. Early bird gets the worm?" she teased.

She turned to the counter behind her, found the coffeepot, refilled her cup without spilling a drop, and returned to the skillet. Johnny marveled at how quickly she had learned to get around the house.

"I've been awake for a while," he said, looking to see whether a piece of bacon was ready.

He had tried coffee once and decided then and there that it wasn't for him. But bacon—now that was the way to start a

day. As if she could read his mind, Fiona lifted a slice from the pan and set it on a napkin.

"Now let it cool for a minute."

"Yes, ma'am . . . Uh, how do you know when it's done?"

"The smell of it, and the way it feels under the spatula." She smiled. "I'm gettin' the hang of this cookin'-without-seein' business." She sipped her coffee and said, "So, John Avery, *why* have you been awake? Anything troublin' you, lad?"

"Not really. I mean, I am a little concerned about the alarm at the bank, but mostly I feel like life is giving me a do-over."

"I know what you mean," Fiona responded. "These last few days, first with you coming to faith and then with the wonderful memories we've been making, I've felt renewed myself."

"I'm just really happy."

Fiona set down her spatula and tousled Johnny's hair affectionately. "That's called joy. It's a gift. And a choice."

Johnny picked up the bacon and began to devour it. "How can it be both?"

"It's a gift from God, one that all Christians receive when they repent of their sinful ways."

Johnny tossed the last bite of his bacon in his mouth. "Then how is it a choice?"

She sipped her coffee and said, "Do you remember that sweater I made for you last Christmas?"

Johnny swallowed a little louder than he intended. He had never told her that he didn't like the sweater because it made him itchy, and he hoped she wouldn't ask now.

"Yeah. It was . . . really well made," he said.

"You've never worn it," she said knowingly.

"Really? Are you sure?" As soon as he asked the question he wished he hadn't.

"I'm quite sure."

Johnny said nothing as he watched the bacon sizzle.

"So, you were given the sweater as a gift. But it's collecting dust in your wardrobe. The same is true of joy or any gift God gives us. He puts these things in our wardrobe.

But we decide whether to take them out and wear them," she said.

"I smell bacon and coffee!" Harold said, entering the room.

Perfect timing, Johnny thought.

During breakfast everyone discussed their plans for the day. Fiona wanted a day to rest. Harold planned to move furniture about to make the home easier for Fiona to navigate. Charlie had the sniffles and was quarantined inside for the day. Johnny was going to ask Emmy to help him pick up the Christmas cards at the Mangle house. That is, if she wasn't still upset with him after their spat at the river. He also thought he should use the opportunity to apologize to Paul—and act as normal as possible around Mr. Mangle.

After three more slices of bacon and two eggs, sunny side up, Johnny got dressed. Before walking out the door, he gave Fiona a big hug.

"Thanks for breakfast," he said, holding her tightly.

When she felt what he was wearing, she smiled.

Over a long-sleeved shirt was the scratchy wool sweater she made for him last Christmas.

"Emmy's not here, *mio caro*. She hasa her last rehearsal for the big play. She said it's still pretty rough so they have a lotta worka to do. She'lla be busy all day."

"I'm sure it's gonna be great. Tell her I stopped by," Johnny said.

"Will do, *bel bambino*. *Ciao*!"

"Bye, Mrs. Capello."

Pretty rough, huh? Johnny thought. *Wilson must be struggling with the song. The guy's probably tone-deaf.*

Johnny considered swinging by the school to see for himself, but thought better of it and made his way toward Steve's house.

Many of the homes on the lane had been decorated for Christmas, some with garland and wreaths, a few with lights.

Snowmen and ice forts had been constructed on quite a few lawns. In the middle of the city park at Smith and Main, the wooden flagpole had been transformed into the city's Christmas tree pole. Holes had been drilled from top to bottom, and handmade boughs were inserted into each hole. The tree was ornately decorated with colored lights and topped with a star. The local paper said that the tree had "myriads of lights, the number of which will boggle the minds of the local populace." The sights evoked a joy for Christmas within Johnny that he couldn't remember ever feeling before.

The Mangle house, however, was unadorned. It appeared dingy and desolate.

Johnny's knock on the door was answered by Paul, who frowned when he saw him.

"Hey, Paul!" Johnny said enthusiastically.

"Come to make fun of my brother being sick again?" The words oozed with animus. He was obviously still upset over Johnny's attempt to use the cloth on Steve at the hospital.

"Actually, I'm here to pick up the Christmas cards. We're selling them at the school play."

Paul folded his arms.

Johnny sighed. "Please don't be mad at me for keeps. I wasn't thinking. I was trying to make things better."

"With a cloth that can heal people? How dumb."

"I know. I'm really sorry."

There was a pause. Johnny was wondering if he should just leave when Paul finally sighed and said, "Well, come in then. Steve's feeling kinda puny today, but he'd prob'ly like to see you."

Johnny stomped the snow off his feet and walked in. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something move and turned to look.

Professor Mangle was sitting on the sofa.

Johnny knew he'd done it now. There was no way Mangle hadn't heard his conversation with Paul.

Their eyes met. Johnny expected a confrontation.

Instead, Mangle smiled softly and said, "*Willkommen*, John," and nothing more.

Johnny made a hasty escape.

He entered the bedroom to see Steve sitting in his chair, eyes closed. “He’s sleeping,” he whispered to Paul.

Steve’s eyes opened. “No, he’s not. Just checking for holes in my eyelids. The cards are over there, by my bed.”

A stack of boxes almost as tall as Johnny leaned up against the wall. “Which box are the cards?” Johnny asked.

Steve smiled limply. “All of ’em.”

“Heavens to Betsy!”

“I know, it’s a lot. I don’t expect you to sell ’em all.”

Johnny feigned offense. “You underestimate my sales skills. In fact, you may need to do a second printing! Emmy and I will bring the money over after.”

“Thanks for doing this,” Steve said, his eyes closed again. “If I had to count on my dopey brother, we wouldn’t sell any.”

“Don’t dall me copey,” Paul said. “Er, call me dopey, I mean.”

“Yeah, why would I do that?”

Johnny jumped on the edge of Steve’s bed. “Did you hear that they turned the play into a fund-raiser for you?”

“Yeah.” A doleful expression crossed Steve’s face. “It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Why? People just want to help out.”

“By feeling sorry for me. They pity the crippled boy. I don’t want that. Just because I can’t walk doesn’t mean I can’t do anything.”

“No one thinks that. I sure don’t.” Johnny’s eyes scanned the room. A dozen sketches that Steve drew covered the walls, along with several paintings. “But if anyone did, they’d change their mind as soon as they see your art.”

Steve didn’t answer. His eyes were squeezed tight. Johnny could see that he was hurting. “I should probably go,” he said softly to Paul, who nodded.

Johnny jumped down from the bed and, leaning over Steve, whispered, “I’ll stop by after the play.”

Steve groaned. His head slumped forward and his body went limp.

“Steve?” Johnny said. *“Steve!”* He looked at Paul.

“Something’s wrong! I think he passed out.”

Paul shook Steve to wake him. “Hey. Wake up.” Then he turned and ran from the room. “Dad, come quick!”

Karl flew into the room. He tried to rouse Steve to no effect. He checked his pulse and listened to his heart. *“Wo ist deine Mutter?”* he asked Paul.

“She’s at the drairhesser,” Paul stumbled, then corrected, “hairdresser. What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know. Go . . . call the doctor. *Schnell!*”

As soon as Paul left the room, Mangle turned to Johnny. “Do you have it?” he roared.

Johnny wasn’t sure how to answer. “Have . . . what?”

Mangle’s voice became desperate. “You *know* what. The *Stoff*! The cloth!”

“I’m sorry. I . . . I . . .”

“Don’t you realize what it could do? It could save *mein Sohn*!”

“I don’t . . . know what . . .” He faltered.

Mangle grabbed Johnny by the shoulders and held him tightly. “Bring it to me! I should have it anyway. It needs to be studied. Think of all the people who could be helped by it!”

Everything in Johnny wanted to do that very thing, but Fiona’s warnings kept ringing in his ears: “It could do more harm than good,” and “Its power is too strong for anyone to handle.” His mind cleared. There was only one thing he could do. “Can I . . . Let me pray for him.”

“Pray? *Pray?* To what? The air? I heard you talking to Paul. You tried to heal Steve once with the garment already. Bring it to me! I will make sure my boy is healed! Bring it to me!”

Johnny pulled himself from Mangle’s grasp.

He ran.

Out the door. Down the street. As fast as he could.

He ran. And he prayed that God would show him what to do next.

Chapter Eighteen

Johnny burst through the front door, wheezing from exhaustion and running in the bracing cold air. He scared Fiona half to death. Harold saw at once something was terribly wrong.

"John? What is it?"

Through gasps, Johnny explained about Steve passing out and Mangle's urgent demands for the cloth. "But he called it a garment. How would he know that?"

Visibly upset, Harold paced and ranted, "Why did you say anything at all? You know better!"

"I w-wasn't . . . thinking," Johnny stammered.

"I've told you over and over again—"

"Harold," Fiona interrupted, "the boy's beaten himself up well enough. He doesna need an extra pair of hands to help him do the job."

Johnny could see the inner struggle waging in his father. Harold grabbed his coat off the hall tree. "I'm going over there. I'm not sure what I'll say to Karl, but . . . I'll come up with something."

"I'm really sorry," Johnny said.

Harold put his hat on his head, adjusting the brim. Opening the door, he said, "Seems like we can't enjoy a

moment of peace in this house." The door shut forcefully behind him.

Harold returned well after dinner carrying several of the boxes of Steve's Christmas cards. He set them in the entryway and left the others in the car. The look on his face set the tone for the story to come. It would be a tragedy.

Johnny braced himself for the worst. "Is Steve . . . ?"

"No, thank God. But he is in the hospital. The doctor said his heart's getting very weak."

Fiona asked, "What's the prognosis?"

"Short term, he may improve. Long term . . . well, we already know there's no long term for his disease."

The news cast a pall over the room. It was so quiet Johnny could hear the clock tick. It taunted him.

"Did Professor Mangle bring up the cloth?" Johnny asked.

"No. I did. I told him that I mentioned the cloth to you and that you *pretended* your cloth was it."

Johnny knew his father was capable of lying—he'd heard him do it before. But somehow this was different.

"I said what I needed to say, John. I'm not proud of it, but I believe it was the right thing to do, all things considered."

"Do you think he believed you?" Fiona asked.

Harold thought for a moment. "I don't know. But one thing I do know is that they need the money from that fund-raiser now more than ever."

On Sunday morning, the Whittaker family attended church for the first time since Fiona's accident. Pastor Richard Oswald expounded on the Christmas story from Luke 2.

The service was a wonderful experience for Johnny. Rather than occupying his mind with other things, he listened and participated sincerely. And just as Fiona said, he *heard* God, deep within. All the bitterness he harbored had been released and replaced with an undeniable peace. Even his

concern about Steve couldn't shake it—if anything, the peace made his concern more earnest, even hopeful.

Things that felt so big a few days ago now seemed trivial. Lazlo and Wilson were irksome, but he could avoid them if he tried. And even if he couldn't . . . so what? His black eye had healed. If he got another, it would heal too. He had recovered the cloth, even though that was fruitless since Fiona wouldn't allow them to test it on her. Johnny and his father were getting along better these days.

Best and most surprising of all, his newfound faith exhilarated him! He was more curious than ever, more excited to learn and create and do than ever! He thought he'd have to give all that up and just blindly follow. But now that he knew the Source of knowledge and creativity, his passion for learning got even bigger.

He prayed earnestly and thanked God for it all.

That night, every chair in the cafeteria theater was filled and people stood along the back wall and both sides of the room. The troupe would be playing to a packed house.

In addition to bringing in a fair amount of money from the "gate," as they called it, Johnny sold every last box of Steve's Christmas cards. The Depression may have hit their pocketbooks, but it didn't affect the hearts of the community. Hearing that the event was to fund Steve's medical bills fostered a generous holiday spirit. A donation basket on the ticket table was also amply filled. Johnny was overjoyed.

Principal Ambrose took the stage and held up his hands for quiet. "Thank you for attending the first ever play produced here at Brookhaven Public School and for your incredible generosity to the Mangle family, who, as many of you know, are at the hospital tonight treating young Steve's illness. While we all enjoy the holidays in our homes, they will be away from holly and hearth, sitting in a drab, dreary room. Which describes the setting of our play as well. *A Christmas Carol*, by the notable author Charles Dickens, under

the personal direction of Mrs. Alma Wagner. Enjoy the performance."

The audience applauded as the lights dimmed and the curtains pulled back.

Wearing a bald cap, Wilson Knox, as Scrooge, sat behind a table, hunched over a stack of coins. In the corner, the character Bob Cratchit, played by Theodore Allgood, scratched away in a ledger.

"Mr. Scrooge," he said, "might I have the day off tomorrow? It is Christmas Day, sir."

Johnny was impressed. Teddy put on a pretty good English accent.

"Christmas? Bah! Humbug!" Wilson scowled. He picked up a coin, looked it over admiringly, and kissed it. "It's a poor reason to pick a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December."

The crowd chuckled, and Johnny did too. Who'd have thought obnoxious Wilson Knox and wallflower Teddy Allgood would thrive on the stage?

Johnny looked about the room. He recognized most of the people, having seen them around town. A few others worked with his father at Duke University. Half a dozen he'd never laid eyes on. His gaze eventually fell on someone he wished hadn't attended: Al Spade.

He stood in the back, appearing rather suspicious. Johnny looked to see whether Al's invisible aunt had come with him, but he was alone. He didn't watch the play at all, but instead kept looking at a man standing along the left wall in front of a window. The man—lean and angular, with black hair and eyebrows that looked as if they'd been applied with a straight ruler and used as a shelf for his forehead to rest on—seemed distracted, observing the room more than the play and occasionally peeking out the window as well. The man was fidgety in spurts. When the crowd cheered and clapped, he did odd things like wave his hat around. But he didn't seem to notice Al's attention.

Johnny became so engrossed in watching the two men that he nearly missed Emmy's performance. When he heard

her voice, he looked up and saw her chastising Scrooge. Johnny cast a wide grin. At least he wasn't the one on the receiving end of her ire this time.

After her speech, she dashed offstage in tears, a laudable performance that Johnny felt he had unintentionally helped her to rehearse. He was also relieved, for some reason, that she didn't kiss Knox. The crowd burst into applause. Johnny whistled loudly. Too loudly, it seemed, since his father gave him an elbow and a frown.

When Johnny looked back for the man by the window, he was gone. Johnny scanned the room but couldn't find him. Al surveyed the room as well, rather nervously, Johnny thought. One thing was certain . . . something was up.

When the clock on stage struck the second time and the Ghost of Christmas Present said, "Come in and know me better, man!" Al slipped out the back. Now Johnny could barely concentrate.

His father's elbow found its mark again. "Pay attention," he whispered harshly.

"But—"

Harold gave him the parental look of doom. "Quiet!"

Johnny squirmed in his seat as the performance droned on. Tiny Tim, who was played by Emmy's sister Henny, was a hit. Lazlo was imposing enough to play the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. And Wilson continued to shine as Scrooge, who . . .

"Was better than his word," Mrs. Wagner narrated. "He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world."

The audience applauded. The time had come for Wilson's solo. Johnny prepared for a disaster.

The music played scratchily over a Victrola, and Wilson walked to the front of the stage.

"Silent night. Holy night. All is calm, all is bright. . . ."

Johnny's jaw dropped. Wilson could *sing*! In fact, his voice

was almost angelic!

Johnny thought nothing could surprise him more . . . until the cafeteria door burst open in the middle of the second verse and Deputy Miller charged in.

“Sorry to interrupt, folks, but I need to organize a posse, and I need to do it now. Barrymore Banking and Trust has been robbed!”

Chapter Nineteen

Johnny and Emmy walked toward home, trailing behind the townsfolk buzzing about the shocking news. Those whose money was in the bank were distraught and noted what a dismal Christmas this would be. Those who kept their money elsewhere said this proved once again how you just can't trust a bank.

"I can't believe it," Emmy said. "Did they get all the gold?"

"According to Deputy Miller, they did," Johnny nodded. "And most of the town's cash, too. Did your dad join the posse?"

"Yeah. Yours?"

"He took Fiona and Charlie home first, but he was going to join up with them after."

"Who do you think did it?" Emmy asked. "And don't say Al."

"Why not? He's the most likely culprit."

"Really?" she said knowingly. "Then why is he coming this way?"

Sure enough, Al approached them, pushing against the current of pedestrians like a salmon swimming upstream.

Frustration etched his features.

"Returning to the scene of the crime, most likely," Johnny muttered, stopping in front of the bank.

Emmy growled under her breath.

"Hey, you two. Some news about the bank, eh?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "I hope you didn't put your aunt's money in it."

Al looked confused for a second, but then said, "Oh. Uh, no. Didn't do that."

"Aren't you joining the posse?" Emmy asked.

"That's where I'm headed now. I had to pick up a few things first."

Emmy's gaze switched to Johnny. Eyebrows raised, she noted, "He's joining the posse."

Johnny ignored her and decided to lay his cards on the table. "Y'know, Al, some people might consider you a suspect, seeing as how you're new in town and all." He watched closely for any reaction.

"Yeah?" Al replied evenly. "Well, the problem with putting two and two together is that sometimes you get four and sometimes you get twenty-two. Gotta run. You two better go home. It's not safe to be on the street with a gang of bank robbers on the loose." He coughed croakily and walked toward the school.

"You still think he's the robber?" Emmy asked, her voice laced with sarcasm.

Johnny mused on it. "I'm not sure."

"Well, that's an improvement. I thought by now you'd have him in cuffs."

They started to walk away when a man shouted, "You!"

It was Mr. Underwood. He stood in front of the bank, where a crowd of people gathered. "I'm surprised you'd show your face around here, John Whittaker! You and that Ben Huck have done great damage to this community."

Underwood's indictment felt as hard as Lazlo Farnsworth's punch in the eye. He wondered whether to walk away or defend himself.

He didn't have to choose, as Ben emerged from the side of

the building. “They’s no point in assignin’ blame,” he said. “The folks responsible are them what robbed the bank.”

“Yes,” Underwood agreed, “however the two of you installed an alarm system that would purportedly thwart a burglary. The only thing it accomplished was to make me feel as if the bank were safer. The thieves had no trouble circumventing it.”

Ben said, “The power to the building was cut. It disabled the alarm. These people were professionals, most likely a gang.”

“You sound as if you have experience, Mr. Huck,” Underwood insinuated.

“No, sir. But I know how many men it takes to do a job, and this one needed two or three at least. By the damage inside, I’d say they used dynamite.”

“That was the assessment of the lawman, yes.”

“Whoever it was knew the whole town’d be at the play. They prob’ly waited for a grand ovation to mask the sound of the explosion. ’Course you’d need a lookout—”

“They should never have gotten that far!” Underwood bellowed. “The alarm system—that I paid you handsomely for—should have alerted the sheriff. Thanks to your incompetence, these fair people,” he said his arm sweeping in a grand gesture toward those standing about, “have lost everything!”

He pointed at Ben and Johnny. “Shame on you! Shame on you both!”

Every face of the men and women present glared at Johnny and Ben. The same people who had put Johnny on a pedestal when he found the gold now kicked it out from underneath him.

Emmy charged into the conversation like a lion protecting her cubs. “Shame on *you*, Mr. Underwood! Blaming Johnny and Ben when all they did was go out of their way to help you! And all you people glaring at them—shame on you, too! Johnny could’ve kept that gold, you know. But he didn’t. He’s the most unselfish, giving person I know, and . . . and . . .” She shrieked in frustration.

“Come on, Emmy,” Johnny said gently. “Let’s go.”

They walked around the crowd. Once past them, Johnny turned back and said, “I’m very sorry. Truly.”

“Don’t apologize to them!” Emmy said. “They should be apologizing to you.”

“It doesn’t matter. They’ve lost a lot of money. They’re worried, that’s all.”

Emmy looked at him sideways. “What’s up with you? I thought you’d defend yourself.”

“I didn’t need to,” he said, nudging her. “My friend had my back.”

Around ten o’clock, Harold walked through the Whittakers’ front door. “Before you ask, no, we didn’t find anyone. Those who can are going back out tomorrow. But the state patrol blocked all roads leading out of the county, so Deputy Miller didn’t think they had time to get away. The Feds are on the way, too. If the robbers are still nearby, they’ll catch them.”

Johnny thrashed about in his bed that night, his mind replaying what he should have done to wire the alarm more securely. When he realized that he wouldn’t sleep, he turned on his light and read. After he noticed that he’d read the same paragraph ten times, he got up.

He did any number of things to pass the time: checked his barometer to assess the upcoming weather—foggy; organized his sock drawer (he’d worn the same pair of socks all last week); laid out clothes for the next day—a warm sweater . . . and a fresh pair of socks.

Morning came like a tortoise. By the time Fiona got to the kitchen, Johnny sat at the table dressed and finishing a piece of burnt toast.

“I know you’re champin’ at the bit to get out and see if you can be the hero again and find those criminals, but I don’t want you roaming about,” she said.

“But if I sit inside all day, I’ll bust,” Johnny lamented.

“It’s not in your nature to relax, is it?”

“I can do that when I’m old.”

“Knowin’ you, I doubt you’ll do it even then.” She filled the percolator with water, poured the ground coffee into the basket, tamped on the lid, and plugged the brewer in. She heaved a weary sigh. “There’s no point in delaying the inevitable. You may go out—but try to stay out of trouble. All right?”

As soon as he saw the Capellos’ lights come on, Johnny donned his coat and hat and rushed over.

Mr. Capello let him in and offered him milk. Having forgotten to drink any at home, he was thankful for the chance to wash down the charred remains of his breakfast.

Emmy came down in her pajamas, her hair disheveled. When she saw Johnny, she gasped and ran back upstairs. Upon returning a few minutes later, she had primped and dressed smartly for the day.

Johnny was glad he wasn’t a girl.

The fog had settled in over the town, thick and damp like the steam of a locomotive. Cars drove down the highway one after the other as the race to find the bank robbers resumed.

Johnny desperately wished he could join the posse but knew better than to ask. Not that anyone in town would trust him enough to let him come along.

“I usually sniff mysteries out pretty well, but I sure messed things up this time.”

“I don’t agree,” Emmy said. “You had a hunch that the bank was going to be robbed, right? No one else did. That’s something.”

Johnny looked at her long and hard. He suddenly realized how much he had taken her friendship for granted.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” she asked.

“I was just thinking how sorry I am about arguing with you so much recently. I don’t really have an excuse.”

“Sure you do. You’ve been through a lot. I’m the one without an excuse. I’ve been stubborn.” She waited for a response. “Y’know, you’re supposed to disagree with me.”

“That’s what got me into trouble to begin with,” Johnny

said.

They had a good laugh, and then Johnny caught Emmy up on Fiona's improved outlook on life and his own newfound faith. Emmy was pleased to hear both.

"I'm sorry about the gold," Emmy said. "And I feel bad for people like Arrie. Working extra jobs to help her parents. She had her money there."

"I hadn't thought of that," Johnny lamented.

"I suppose there's one good thing that happened. At least they didn't rob the bank until after the play. If they'd done it sooner, no one would have been able to afford to come."

Johnny perked up. "What did you just say?"

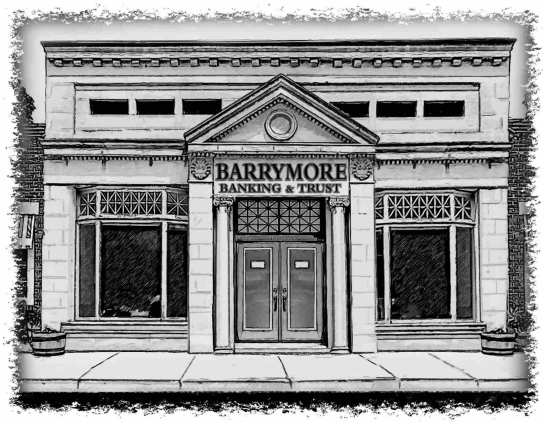
"That people probably wouldn't have been able to afford the play?"

A lightbulb turned on. Johnny wasn't certain . . . but maybe . . . "Come on," he said, running toward the road.

"Wait, where are we going?" Emmy asked.

"I've got another hunch!"

Chapter Twenty



The dense fog lay so thick that Johnny wondered whether they had already passed the road, but a few minutes later they came upon it. They turned in and walked slowly along the trees toward the house.

Two cars were parked beside the house. The black Chevrolet Eagle sedan he had seen when he came to retrieve the cloth and a black Packard Super 8 sedan with whitewall tires. Johnny knew the make and model of the new car instantly, even though it was a luxury car only the wealthy could afford.

"What is this place?" Emmy whispered.

"Arrie's house."

"What are we doing here?"

"Proving my hunch wrong, I hope," Johnny said softly. "You wait here. I want to get a look inside."

"No chance!" Emmy protested. "I didn't come all this way to wait by the trees!"

"Please, Emmy. If my hunch *is* true, it could be dangerous."

"Then you shouldn't go either!"

Johnny looked at her pleadingly.

She sighed in resignation. "Fine. But I still think two are

better than one."

Johnny skulked along the trees trying to remain hidden as much as possible. He tiptoed onto the porch and over to the window. The curtains were drawn but for a gap in middle. Johnny peered between them into the house.

Muffled voices in heated conversation came from another room. After a few minutes, Arrie stumbled into the main room.

Johnny quickly ducked back, hoping he hadn't been seen.

The voices continued, and he peeked in again to see Arrie sitting now on a couch, her head lowered. A man stood over her. His back was to Johnny. He was upset, and no mistaking it. Although he spoke loudly, Johnny could only make out half of his words.

"If you hadn't . . . job . . . safe . . . roadblock . . . how long . . . tie up . . ."

Arrie appeared distressed. He could see it in her posture and on her wincing face.

He turned to press his ear against the window when a hand grabbed his shoulder. He turned quickly.

"Emmy!" he whispered angrily. "What are you doing?"

"I thought I heard something in the trees," she said. "We should go."

Johnny looked back inside. The man continued to harass Arrie, as he threw up his hands in frustration and wheeled about. That's when Johnny saw his face.

It was the man Al kept tabs on at the school play.

Johnny nodded to Emmy. "*Now* we should go."

"I don't think so," a voice at the bottom of the porch said.

A man with slicked-back hair and a trace of a moustache walked up the steps and pointed to the door. "I think you'd better get inside. Now."

"Run, Emmy!" Johnny leapt off the porch, landing in front of the man. His momentum carried him forward, and he used it to shove the man backward.

The man was hardly fazed. He grabbed Johnny by the shoulders, holding him tightly.

Instead of running away, Emmy joined the offensive,

swinging wildly for the man's face and landing most of her blows. Johnny rallied with a forearm strike to the man's chin.

The blow was unexpected. The man's head whipped back and he stumbled in pain. Johnny unleashed a kick into the man's shin, followed by a palm heel strike.

The man regrouped. He grabbed hold of Johnny's arm and swung him around directly into Emmy, knocking them both off their feet. Emmy's head thumped loudly against the stairs.

The door burst open and the man from inside ran out to investigate. "Harry! What's going on?"

"These kids were snooping on you, Ray. Spyin' through the window." He smoothed his hair back into place.

Arrie emerged. Seeing Johnny and Emmy, she ran to them. "Laws a mercy! Are you two all right?"

"Actually, they dished out more than they took," Harry said, massaging his jaw.

The two men grabbed hold of the kids and pulled them inside. Emmy was dazed but unhurt.

Johnny was livid. "Deputy Miller knows we're here. If I were you—"

"If you were me," Harry said, "you'd come up with a better lie. No deputy would send a kid to do his work for him."

Emmy pleaded, "If you let us go, we'll stay quiet until morning. That would give you enough time to get away."

Arrie said, "That's a good idea, Alvin. You don't want kids getting mixed up in this."

"Alvin?" Emmy said. "I thought he called you Ray?"

The man with two names said, "I go by both."

At that moment, Johnny knew he and Emmy were in worse trouble than they imagined. "Are you . . . Alvin Karpis?"

A sinister smile crept over his face. "Of the infamous Barker-Karpis Gang," he said, bowing theatrically. "At yer service."

Johnny's heart stopped. The newspapers said that the Barker-Karpis Gang, one of the most formidable criminal gangs of the decade, was as ruthless as they came. They didn't

hesitate to bump off anyone who stood in their way, even innocent bystanders. The gang had been run by Ma Barker until her passing earlier in the year in a shoot-out with the FBI.

Alvin was said to be the brains now. Word was that he and some other fellow, likely Harry, had recently robbed a bank, killing a police officer in the process.

And now they were here. In Provenance. These were not people to trifle with. Johnny's and Emmy's lives were in jeopardy.

Emmy said, "Are you all right, Miss Arrie? Have they hurt you?"

Johnny responded first. "Don't you get it, Emmy? She's *with* them."

Emmy looked from Johnny to Arrie, waiting for someone to explain. Finally, Karpis stepped forward.

"You might say she's part of the gang," he said. "But her name's not Arrie."

Harry joined in the fun. "Ma Barker's given name was Arizona. Arrie for short."

"She knew Ma—most everyone from the *Dillinger* gang did," Karpis said.

His name-drop had its intended effect. Johnny's eyes widened, and Emmy looked faint. "D-Dillinger?" she stammered.

A smile curved the woman's lips. "I'm sentimental at heart. It's a way of keeping Ma's memory alive, I guess. Mary Kinder's my rightful name. But don't you two worry. Nothin's gonna happen to ya."

"I wouldn't go that far," Karpis interjected. "Nothin'll happen *if* you do as you're told. If you don't . . . well, all bets are off. Understood?"

Johnny and Emmy both nodded.

"Here's what's gonna happen. You," Karpis said, pointing at Johnny, "are going to run into town and tell the coppers that you know where we are. You're going to say we're on the *opposite* end of town—you can figure out where. But it needs to be a real place or it won't stall them for long."

“It could be the grotto down by the river,” Johnny suggested. “There aren’t any roads, so it would take a while for them to get there.”

“Now you’re thinkin’. You tell ’em we’re hunkered in there, ready for a fight. That should bring all the Feds and police in, opening up a way out of town for us. You do that, and we won’t harm a hair on your heads.”

“Emmy and I should both go,” Johnny said. “Or people would wonder where she is. We said we’d spend the day together.”

“Nope, she stays,” Karpis said. “Insurance. If you tip off the coppers that we’re here . . . well, you’ll have to live with what happens to her the rest of your life.”

“Let me go with him, please! We won’t say a word,” Emmy promised.

“Do I look stupid to you?” Karpis bellowed. He lifted Johnny to his feet. “Now git goin’. And be quick about it. By the time you get back, the loot’ll be in the car and we can all take a nice drive together.”

“Together?” Mary protested. “No, we leave the kids here!”

“To blab to the Feds?” Harry said. “Not a chance.”

“Don’t worry,” Karpis reasoned. “Once we’re safely outta town, we’ll drop you two off. Other than a long walk home, you’ll be right as rain.” Then he grabbed Johnny’s shoulders, leaned down in his face and hissed, “But only if you *do as you’re told!*”

Johnny ran through the soupy fog toward the main road. His head was spinning. He couldn’t let the robbers get away, but if he told the authorities, Emmy would be in danger. Of course, he didn’t trust Karpis’s promise to let them go, either. If he *was* as ruthless as the newspapers said, he wouldn’t want any witnesses.

Just as Johnny reached the main road, a voice called out. He turned to see someone waving at him from the woods.

It was Al.

Johnny wasn't sure what to do. Deciding that Al's snooping around could put Emmy in danger, he hurried over to stop him.

"What are you doing here?" Johnny asked. "Is the posse nearby?"

"Nope. Just me. Is Emmy all right?"

"Why? Do you think she's in trouble?"

Al looked as if there was something he wasn't saying. "Well . . . I don't mind a reasonable amount of trouble, but somethin' tells me she might be in deeper."

That's when the lightbulb went off. "You like to quote books, don't you?" Johnny said.

Al flinched. "What do you mean?"

"First yesterday and again just now. You quoted from *The Maltese Falcon.* I've read it five times. It's written by Dashiell Hammett. He used to be a Pinkerton detective. But you already knew that, didn't you . . . Mr. Hammett?"

Al's face lit up in surprise. "Impressive, young man. How did you figure it out?"

"Someone overheard you in the diner. Said that you used a different name than Al. Rhymes with Sam. That, and the quotes, and a few other things put it together for me. Including you spying on a man at the play. And that ruse about your aunt—a fair cover, I guess."

Hammett grinned. "Guilty on all counts. So now that you know I'm not the bank robber . . . are they holding Emmy hostage?"

"You know?" Johnny asked.

"I started putting my own pieces together at the play. The man you saw me watching looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place him. Afterward I realized it was Harry Campbell, which means that Alvin Karpis isn't far behind. They're dangerous men."

"How did you know they were in this house?"

"I've been trailing Mary Kinder. Which is why I spent so much time in the diner. Don't trust her for a moment. She's loyal to those she runs with. Now tell me what's going on."

Johnny quickly explained. Then he asked, "Are you

working for the Pinkertons again? Is that why you're here?"

"Not the Pinkertons. J. Edgar Hoover. He's using as much firepower as he can to put these gangs out of business for good. I said I'd help out here. Now," he mused, "what to do about this mess."

"I have an idea," Johnny said.

"What are you gonna do?" Hammett asked.

"Put two and two together," Johnny announced, disappearing into the fog.

Chapter Twenty-One

Johnny's hand had only rapped once when the door opened and Karpis pulled him inside.

"What took you so long?" Karpis raged.

"The sheriff was out with the posse," Johnny said nervously. "I had to wait until they got back. It took some convincing to get them to believe me."

"And?"

"They're on the way to the grotto. The coast is clear." Johnny knew the next moment was crucial. In spite of his promises, Karpis might have already decided that he and Emmy were liabilities that must be disposed of. "What are you going to do with us?" Johnny asked.

"Just what he said he'd do," Mary insisted, shooting Karpis a look that would bend iron. "You two will ride with me." She put on her coat.

"I hope you're driving the Packard," Johnny said. "That car is neat."

"There's another wish shattered," Harry answered. "Karpis and I are taking it."

Johnny looked back to see Alvin staring at him. The papers called him Creepy Karpis for good reason. The guy's

smile was enough to make a snake's skin crawl. He walked toward Johnny and looked past him out the window.

The only thing visible through the fog was the Packard. Karpis squinted to see if anyone was lurking about. Johnny tried to steady his breathing. One false step and . . .

"We're leaving," he announced.

Emmy, Johnny, and Mary headed for the Eagle. Karpis stopped them. "Get in the other car," he ordered.

"Okay, Alvin," Mary said.

"Not you. You and Harry take the Eagle. The kids come with me in the Packard."

Concern etched Mary's face. "But—"

"Do it!" Karpis barked. Mary hesitated, then angrily walked to the Chevy, slid in beside Harry, and slammed the door.

Johnny leaned over to Emmy, who looked terrified. "It'll be okay, Emmy," he murmured.

"Get in," Karpis ordered.

They climbed into the backseat of the Packard and Karpis slid into the driver's seat. He started the car and adjusted his rearview mirror—not to see through the back window, but to keep an eye on Johnny.

Both cars sped away from town, taking a back road. Johnny knew it would eventually link up with Highway 128 toward Durham.

He also knew now how the bugs he watched under a microscope felt. Karpis kept one eye on the road and the other glued to him. He couldn't decide whether the man didn't trust him or was figuring out how to dispose of him. Neither was a good option.

It should have happened by now, he thought.

His concern must have showed on his face, because Karpis said, "Don't get any ideas, kid. Remember what I told you."

"I just don't feel well," Johnny said, and it was no lie. His stomach was doing backflips.

Karpis's scrutinizing eye lingered, then looked away, as the car sped up coming into a straight bit of road. "Looks like you did as you were told," he said. "No roadblocks in sight."

Emmy tapped Johnny's leg. She mouthed the words, "We need to get out of here."

Johnny gave no response. And good thing. Creepy Karpis was staring again.

Ten minutes later, Johnny began to panic. They'd been driving too long. No longer did they drive past wooded valleys. The terrain had opened up and the fog had lifted. Even if the plan did work, they'd never get away. There was no place to hide. And no help in sight.

Just as he was about to give up hope, an explosion erupted behind them.

"What in the world!" Karpis yelled, slamming on the brakes.

Johnny and Emmy spun about and looked out the back window. The car that Mary and Harry had been driving had swerved off the road and lay on its side in a ditch. Smoke billowed up in big puffs.

Karpis jumped out of the Packard and ran to the crash site.

He had left the car running. Johnny had a *new* idea.

"Quick, Emmy! Hop into the front seat!"

"What?" she said, bewildered.

"Just do it!" Johnny snapped.

Both climbed over, Johnny into the driver's seat and Emmy beside him.

"You're going to drive?" Emmy yawped.

"*We're* going to drive." He slipped down off the seat until his feet reached the pedals. The steering wheel was right in his face. He couldn't see over the dash.

"Make sure I stay on the road," he cried out. Then, pushing down the clutch, he said, "Put it in gear! Quick!"

Emmy whispered a prayer, grabbed the long black shifter, and tugged it toward the side.

"No—up! Up!" Johnny instructed.

Emmy pushed up, and the gear ground loudly before slipping in. The noise must have alerted Karpis, who yelled something at them.

"Go, Johnny! Now!" Emmy screamed.

Johnny pressed down on the gas as he let out the clutch. The car lurched ahead in jarring bursts.

Emmy turned to look back. “He’s coming! Hurry!”

Johnny pushed the gas pedal down all the way and the car lurched ahead. The gears quickly whined as if they were about to explode.

“We have to shift again. Ready?”

“Which way this time?” she asked.

“Straight down.”

He depressed the clutch and let up on the gas. Emmy pulled hard, struggling to move the gear-shift. It was stuck.

“Pull harder!” Johnny yelled.

“I’m pulling!”

He let go of the wheel, put his hands over hers, and pulled. Together, they got the car into second gear. Johnny took hold of the wheel again, released the clutch, and pressed the gas. The car sped up.

Emmy looked over the dash. “You’re going off the road! Go right! Right!”

Johnny turned the wheel.

“Not so much!”

He turned back to the left.

“Good. Straight now.”

Johnny heard the gunshots first. Emmy finally screamed when one shattered the back window and exited through the front windshield.

“Get down, Emmy!” Johnny ordered.

Two more rounds popped off. Johnny heard one hit the chassis of the car, twanging. The other ricocheted off the back fender.

Johnny sat up and turned around to see how far they were from Karpis. It was a poor choice. Although they were fifty yards or more down the road from the accident, they veered off the road.

Emmy popped up and saw that they were bouncing through a snow-covered meadow.

“Where are we?” Johnny asked, back at the wheel.

“Making a new road,” she said. “It’s okay. Just drive

faster. We may not be doing it right, but at least we're getting away!"

Moments later the car bogged down in a snowdrift. Johnny and Emmy got out and looked back to see if Karpis had followed them. He was nowhere in sight.

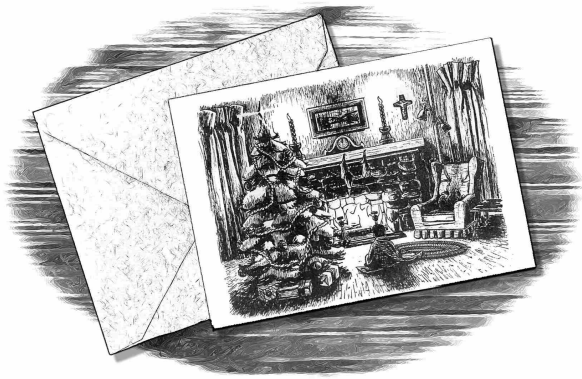
They spotted a farmhouse nearby and headed toward it at a sprint.

"You sure know how to show a girl a good time," Emmy said.

"The stuff that dreams are made of," Johnny said in his best Sam Spade voice.

By the time the deputies arrived at the scene of the accident, the three thieves had fled. Unfortunately, the bank's cash and the gold fled with them.

Chapter Twenty-Two



"Anyway, when I got to thinking about it," Johnny prattled on effervescently, "I couldn't recall Arrie being in town *before* we found the gold. And since she had a job in the diner where most people in town go to blab about everything *and* a side job cleaning for the school, where she could hear whatever news the kids would spill, she just seemed like the perfect suspect for scouting out a bank heist. Not to mention that she knew we were installing the alarm and heard me talking about how to defeat it. But why not rob the bank before we had a chance to install the alarm? Because she had a soft spot for Steve. When you said that if the town's money had been stolen before the fund-raiser, then people wouldn't have been able to afford to attend the play or buy his cards, I thought it had to be her. All the pieces fit!"

Emmy stared at him blankly. "Did you even take a *breath* when you recited all that?"

Johnny blushed a little. "Sorry. The adrenaline must've kicked in."

They sat in the back of Deputy Miller's squad car. The realization that a famous gangster had targeted their town—and that they had gotten through it safely—was about as exciting as it gets.

“You two are fortunate. That Karpis is a bad egg,” Deputy Miller said pulling into town.

Emmy stared out the window watching the buildings scan by. While Johnny felt invigorated, she looked . . . sad.

“Are you all right, Emmy?” Johnny asked.

“Yeah. A little shook up from getting shot at by one of America’s most wanted criminals, but mostly . . .”

Johnny said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

“Arrie—or Mary—seemed so . . . nice.” She sighed wistfully.

“She *was* nice. I liked her too,” Johnny said.

Deputy Miller stated, “I reckon we’re all a mixture of good and bad. Whichever we chase after is the thing that defines us.”

The squad car pulled to a stop in front of the Provenance Sheriff Station. “I’ll need you two to give a statement. Then I’ll drive you home. Your folks are pretty anxious to see you.”

Johnny recounted everything for Deputy Miller, with Emmy filling in the details he forgot. For the first time, Emmy found out what caused the explosion in the Chevy that Harry Campbell and Mary Kinder were driving.

“I wasn’t about to do what Karpis wanted. I knew he wouldn’t let us go,” Johnny said. “Instead, I called the station and asked you to break up the roadblocks—but to follow behind us a mile or two back. Of course, you weren’t crazy about the idea, but Emmy was in danger. We couldn’t think of another choice.

“Next, I went to Ben Huck’s and picked up an old car battery of mine. It had been struck by lightning,” Johnny said, looking over at Emmy, whose mouth gaped at the news. “The battery was volatile and I knew that a single spark could cause it to blow. Ben and I quickly created a fuse that would ignite when the engine got hot enough. He wanted to help me install it, but it was too risky. If Karpis saw him, the jig would have been up.

“He came with me but hid in the trees. That way if Karpis drove in a different direction than I told him to, he could let you know. Anyway, it was so foggy no one in the house could

see when I replaced the Chevy's battery with the damaged battery. I hoped it would explode as soon as they started the car, but just in case it didn't, I inserted the fuse into the battery block. And then, yeah . . . it sure did explode."

Emmy's listened in disbelief. "But . . . how did you know *we* wouldn't be in that car?" she asked.

"I didn't," Johnny admitted. "I thought Karpis would probably want us with him and that he'd drive the expensive car. But it was a guess."

"You mean, you knew that thing would blow up and we could've been in the car? Unbelievable! Were you *trying* to get us killed?"

"I was trying to save us."

"I said it before and I'll say it again: you better hope my dad never finds out."

Before they finished at the station, Dashiell Hammett stopped in.

"Any word on Karpis from the Feds?" Deputy Miller asked.

"Oh, sure. Someone said they saw him in Florida two hours ago, another in Chicago one hour ago."

"That'd be a trick," Johnny said. "They took off on foot not thirty minutes ago."

"Hoover's none too happy. Congress is putting the heat on him. They say the FBI's getting nothin' done. He desperately wants to nab Karpis."

A massive manhunt scoured the countryside that night and the next day. It came up empty. Karpis and his minions had wriggled out of capture again.

Johnny rang the doorbell at the Mangle house, rousting Karl from sleep. When he opened the door, Johnny stood bearing a small leather pouch and a ready smile.

"*Herr* Whittaker."

"Professor Mangle. How's Steve?"

“He’s dying. And there’s nothing I can do about it. I was with him all night. My wife is there now. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing. I came to bring you this. Hopefully it’ll help with your expenses.”

He handed the bag to Mangle, who took it reluctantly.

“It’s the money from our school fund-raiser and from the sale of Steve’s Christmas cards.”

Mangle unzipped the pouch and looked inside. That he was shocked would be an understatement. There was enough cash inside to cover a sizable portion of Steve’s medical expenses. “I . . . don’t know . . . what to say,” he faltered.

“Me either. Except, I’ll be praying for Steve. And you.”

Mangle nodded slightly. “*Danke*” was all he said before retreating into the house and closing the door.

As Johnny walked home, he thought that while things weren’t easy, with his new faith guiding him he had a lot more light to see around the dark places.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Christmas Eve service was deeply meaningful. The small chapel looked majestic, with a brilliant display of lights and festive decorations. A large Christmas tree was ornamented with popcorn and cranberries strung together, a long paper-loop chain, candy canes and glass icicles, and a golden-haired angel on the top. Underneath, bags filled with an assortment of nuts and fruits waited for the children.

The songs, though sung every year, seemed to Johnny to have beautiful new lyrics. The words about Jesus and His journey to earth brought new meaning, especially "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel":

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things, far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And cause us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

On Christmas morning, the Whittaker family gathered around their tree. Before opening gifts, they thanked God for His immeasurable love.

Johnny received three gifts that day. The first was a journal.

"You can use it to write down your ideas, your inspirations, and your memories," Fiona suggested. "But most of all, write what God is teaching you. You've begun an exciting adventure, John Avery. Some days will be challenging, others rewarding. But always remember that the best days aren't the ones on this earth. The best is yet to come."

Johnny fingered the leather binding. He wondered whether his journal would be as special to someone else someday as his grandfather's journal was to him now. He could never hope to be as great a man as his grandfather.

But he would try.

Johnny's second gift brought a grin to his face. His father had bought him the Mickey Mouse lunch kit he had wanted so badly.

"I thought you said it was frivolous?" Johnny teased.

"It is," Harold answered. "But a little frivolity never hurt anyone."

The third gift, though, topped them all.

Harold took the family for a short drive. Fiona told Johnny, "Keep yer eyes closed, laddie. And no peeking!"

Johnny obliged, though it wasn't easy, especially when

they got out of the car. Walking without seeing was a challenge. He had new appreciation for what Fiona experienced every day.

He couldn't make sense of the noises he heard or the smells. After what seemed an eternity, Fiona said, "All right, laddie. You can look."

What he saw instantly brought tears to his eyes.

Fiona sat atop the same horse she last rode on the day she lost her sight. "Care for a ride?"

"You're . . . you're . . ." The sight was so meaningful that he couldn't even get the words out.

"You didn't think I'd give up our jaunts together just because of one accident, did you?" she said cheerfully.

"But how will you . . . ?"

"See? I have four perfectly good eyes. Yours and Earl's here," she said, patting the horse. "I trust you both completely."

Johnny looked to his father, who couldn't hide his own curious mixture of anxiety coupled with joy. Harold wiped his eyes, smiled, and nodded approvingly.

"Well, get on yer horse, laddie! And *let's go explorin'*!"

That Saturday the family lazed about. Charlie played in her room with the new doll she got for Christmas, while Harold, as usual, read the newspaper. Fiona rested in her room. Fred Astaire crooned over the radio.

Johnny sat across from his father reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*. A knock on the door pulled him away from Edmond Dantès's heroic escape from the Château d'If. When he opened the door, the postman handed him the day's mail—a few letters and one small package. The package had been posted overseas.

Johnny gave the mail to his father, who looked at the package and smiled. "This must be the translation of your grandfather's journal."

Harold quickly unwrapped it. A note had been inserted

inside the front cover. He read it silently.

Johnny stood beside him, thinking he should be the one reading the note since the journal was given to him. Instead, he bit his tongue and read his father's reactions.

When Harold finished the note he looked thunderstruck.

Johnny's heart quickened. "What is it? What did the note say?"

Harold leaned back in his chair and breathed in deeply. After a few seconds, he slowly exhaled.

"It seems there's a good deal of information to wade through. But the most amazing revelation is that the cloth was indeed a garment. It's believed that your healing cloth is actually . . . from the robe of Jesus Christ."